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POLITICIZING THE READER IN THE AMERICAN LYRIC-EPIC:  
WALT WHITMAN'S *LEAVES OF GRASS* AND PABLO NERUDA'S *CANTO GENERAL*

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Interdepartmental Program in Comparative Literature

by  
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## Abstract

Both Walt Whitman and Pablo Neruda wanted to create epic works that would distinguish American literature from the literary traditions of Europe, works that would grow organically from the native landscapes and peoples of the Americas. Part of their projects included creating works that would act as political sourcebooks for their cultures. Whitman wanted to foster a democratic culture in the United States through writing a grand poetic work, while Neruda wanted to create a communist culture in Latin America through an epic work. Soon into the project Whitman realized that the traditional epic was not a suitable form for his task, so in attempting to construct a new form, he created the lyric-epic in his *Leaves of Grass*. Since Neruda believed that Whitman was the first authentic literary voice of the Americas and that the lyric-epic was a native form, he used *Leaves of Grass* as a paradigm when writing his *Canto general*. In separate discussions of each work, this study examines the politics of both writers and why they wanted to write political sourcebooks; their use of camaraderie/fraternity to tie readers together for democratic or communist governments; their rewriting of history as redemption and as the progression of democracy or communism; and lastly, their endeavors to teach readers to read as democrats or communists. Ultimately, the study argues that Neruda and Whitman were the foundations and the peaks of their literary traditions and that studying Whitman's and Neruda's lyric-epics reveals a common form for poetic epic attempts in the Americas after Whitman; moreover, it argues that even while Neruda used *Leaves of Grass* as a paradigm, he wrote a work of equal standing to it in *Canto general*.

## Chapter 1: The Lyric-Epic Tradition and Literary Sourcebooks

America is therefore the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the world's history shall reveal itself.

G. W. F. Hegel (193)

Both Walt Whitman and Pablo Neruda were plagued by the desire to give creative expression to the wide and rambling landscapes and cultures of the Americas. They felt that their literary traditions were laboring under the yoke of European traditions and that without performing the task of naming in the Americas, of giving form and meaning to their societies, their cultures would remain confused, lacking in their own identities. This sense was compounded because both felt that their ideal political systems were verging on the point of dissolution. Communism, Neruda's ideal system, was battling the long reach of Western capitalism and the legacies of European aristocratic culture. Democracy, Whitman's ideal, was still an experiment, waiting to be proved workable or an idealistic dream destined for failure. In response to this uncertainty, Whitman felt compelled to assume the mantle of the epic bard and write a poem with a national scope to distinguish American literature and to shape a democratic culture in the United States. Such a piece of literature would breathe "into it [America] a new breath of life, giving it decision, affecting politics far more than the popular superficial suffrage, with results inside and underneath the elections of Presidents or Congresses" (*Poetry* 956). This new life would help the fledgling democracy stay united since he believed that a political culture, in his case democratic culture, must be in place before a political system can function for a people. Neruda, much like Whitman, wanted to write a work to "discover it [Latin America], to build it" (qtd. in Santí's *Canto General* 258). He wanted to create an epic work that would found a new literary tradition in Latin

America, for such a work and tradition would bind together Latin Americans and lead them to a better future. Like Whitman, he believed that a political culture must be in place before a political system is set up. When Neruda began the task of creating an epic work roughly a hundred years after Whitman first published *Leaves of Grass*, he searched widely for writers in the Americas, trying to find some native expression that would help with his own; what he found was Whitman's attempt to shore up democracy through his lyric-epic *Leaves of Grass*, a work which had already had more influence on Neruda's poetry and politics than any other. Whitman's goal in *Leaves of Grass* was similar to what Neruda was seeking, for in it Whitman attempts to create a grand poetic work to function as a political sourcebook for democratic culture, but to do that he refigures the epic with the lyric. In this combination he creates the lyric-epic, a native form from which Neruda can pattern his lyric-epic *Canto general*. From this foundation, Neruda attempts, in ways similar to Whitman in the United States, to create a new style, tradition, and culture that is separate from but equal to that of Europe and to help Latin Americans realize the dream of a unified Latin America. In the years since it was written, *Canto general* has become a foundational work for Latin American poetry as *Leaves of Grass* is for American poetry.<sup>1</sup>

This study attempts to understand Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* as a foundational lyric-epic for the political culture of the United States and as inspiration for Neruda's similar task for Latin America in *Canto general*.<sup>2</sup> The first half of this study examines Whitman's politics and how they helped form the political framework of *Leaves of Grass*; his attempt to create a spirit of camaraderie to tie citizens together; his use of history both to emphasize the natural progression of democracy and the continuation of

democracy once solidified; and lastly, his use of poetics in an attempt to create a reader who could read in a democratic fashion. The study's second half concerns similar topics in Neruda's *Canto general*, considering them as an inheritance of Whitman by a poet of equal worth. It explores Neruda's politics and why he wanted to write a political sourcebook; his use of camaraderie/fraternity to tie readers together for communist regimes; his rewriting of history as redemption and as the progression of communism; and lastly, his endeavor to teach readers to read as communists.

Both Whitman and Neruda aspired to the stature of the epic poet based in the tradition of Homer, Virgil, and Dante, a role that called for being both the foundation and the peak of their literary tradition. Yet both believed that the purposes of epic are larger and more organically connected to society than the European tradition they wanted to transcend. This study examines the relation between poetry and political culture that both poets sought to build, a relation that could with justice be termed organic because it retains its general goals despite drastic changes in time, language, social structure, and political ideology between the two poets. Neruda drew his faith that poetry can affect politics from Whitman's attempt to do just that in *Leaves of Grass*. He transformed and discarded parts of Whitman's democratic vision to suit it to the communist readers he would create through his poetry. And the creation of a new kind of reader for a new society, in turn, was a poetic purpose learned from Whitman. As organic adaptations of a common purpose, *Leaves of Grass* and *Canto general* receive separate explorations in this study, but with the understanding that examining the two together will reveal a common matrix for attempts at poetic-epics after Whitman in the Americas. Moreover, exploring both works as poems intended as political sourcebooks,



directed as they are toward quite different ideologies, should shed light on the common conception of the relation between poetry and political culture held by the two great poets.

### I. Epics of the Americas

Both Whitman and Neruda turned to the epic as a genre because the epic concerns events important to the community. It finds, as Bakhtin states, its roots in a national tradition (17), and as Georg Lukács suggests, it gives form to the totality of life (46). This task of forming the totality of a community's life requires an exploration of history to create or to record a myth that will help encompass the past and lead towards a future. Walter Benjamin alludes to this exploration of history by stating, "One may . . . raise the question of whether historiography does not constitute the common ground of all forms of epic" (*Illuminations* 95). In addition, theorists have often thought of the epic as *the* genre for influencing a reader's perspective. For example, Sir Philip Sidney states that the heroic or epic poem is the highest type of poetry because the lofty images it contains inflame "the mind with desire to be worthy, and inform with counsel how to be worthy" (119). Torquato Tasso echoes this claim by stating that epic poetry is "an imitation of a noble action, great and perfect, narrated in the loftiest verse, with the purpose of moving the mind to wonder" (28). When Whitman and Neruda searched for a form through which to write a national work that would influence the people, that would create a myth of a certain political allegiance (democratic for Whitman, communist for Neruda), they turned to the epic as the genre of nation building, of myth creating. Besides, as Earl Fitz remarks, the epic is well-suited to discussing the conquest and colonization of the Americas (48), as the frequency of attempts by writers

in both Anglo and Latin America would suggest. Before turning to Whitman's and Neruda's reasons for attempting epics, looking at other epic attempts in the Americas can clarify the problems and issues they encountered and why, instead of writing traditional epics, Whitman and Neruda wrote lyric-epics.

An epic tradition in Latin America traces to Alonso de Ercilla's *La araucana* (*The Arucanadid*), which describes Chile's conquest. Pablo Neruda often stated that Latin America was created by poets, and it is Ercilla to whom he credits this creation. True to the spirit of later Latin American epic writers, Ercilla in *La araucana* expresses dismay at his fellow countrymen's greed during the conquest. The poem concerns events in progress and is told by a poet who is the main character; moreover, there is no single hero but rather a number of heroes. Yet Ercilla's work does not fulfill the function of an epic of the Americas as imagined by later poets, partially due to its regional approach and partially due to its scope, but it does provide a paradigm for later poets, some of whom invoke Ercilla's name since he provides a paternal figure for a Latin American tradition—he furnishes an image of a poet who can be called Latin American instead of European. Even so, other attempts at Latin American epic were not made until much later by writers like Andrés Bello, José de Alencar, Gonçalves Dias, Rubén Darío, and José Santos Chocano.

As with Ercilla, when Andrés Bello took up the task, he chose the epic for its foundational qualities. Seeing the Americas as a land yet without culture, Andrés Bello worked in the early part of the nineteenth century to address this problem. His solution, the creation of an epic work, was one he tried and failed to accomplish. In his epic

attempt “Alocución” (“Address”), he calls on the spirit of poetry to leave the tired continent of Europe for the fresh, teeming landscape of the New World:

Divina Poesía,  
tú de la soledad habitadora,  
a consultar tus cantos enseñada  
con el silencio de la selva umbía,  
tú a quien la verde gruta fue morada,  
y el eco de los montes compañía;  
tiempo es que dejes ya la culta Europa,  
que tu nativa rustiquez desama,  
y dirijas el vuelo adonde te abre  
el mundo de Colón su grande escena. (1-10)

Divine Poetry,  
you who dwell in solitude  
and wrap your songs  
in the silence of the shaded forest;  
you who lived in the green grotto,  
the mountain echoes your company.  
Time it is to abandon Europe,  
no lover of your native rusticity,  
and turn your fancy to the great setting  
unveiled by the new world.<sup>3</sup>

His desire is unlike later Latin American writers in that he invites the goddess of poetry to come to the New World. For Bello, the spirit of poetry is rustic as the Americas are rustic, and he intends to readjust this rustic nature of the Americas through poetry, yet it is also this same rustic sense that allows poetry a home in the New World. Bello does not ask for a new tradition of poetry, a poetry grounded in the people, as later writers demand. He asks for the inspiration of an American Virgil, for a poet who can sing the founding of a new empire of the American republics. While Bello's poem has often been taken as a claim of Latin American intellectual independence, it is, as Antonio Cussen argues, highly classical, not only in its epic invocation but also in its desire to provide a new extension of Western culture (100). The poem is an attempt to lift the

poetry of the Americas to the level of European poetry; thus, it is an attempt to show that the Americas can start a poetic tradition worthy of the future, and yet the poem relies heavily on the past. Moreover, this reliance on the past is what differentiates attempts at the epic in Latin America and the United States. In general, Latin American writers feel the sense of having a textual past in a way that Anglo American writers do not. As stated earlier, Neruda claimed that Latin America was created by writers, a claim that does not resonate in Anglo America. In Anglo America the idea of immanence is more prevalent than textuality—this idea finds expression in the works of most of the Transcendentalists. Important early Anglo American writers stress their own experience in the present without referencing the authority of past texts. Their presence in the now is more authoritative to them than past texts. Henry David Thoreau expresses this sentiment often in *Walden*. In contrast, Bello believed that Americas are without culture, but he believed that American texts, once written, could take place in the constellation of European texts.

Latin American Modernists attempted American epics, yet no work came close to achieving the task until Pablo Neruda's *Canto general*. When Neruda attempts the epic, he is aware of Latin American examples, but he uses Whitman's work as a working model. It suffices to say here that Latin American poets felt a need for a Pan-American culture just as much as did thinkers like Simón Bolívar and José Enrique Rodó.<sup>4</sup> Poets like Rubén Darío imagined themselves as more than just citizens of one country, even if the political reality lagged behind the cultural reality. In attempting the epic, Latin American writers were searching for a myth that would tie together Latin America, much in the way that the states are tied together in the United States. In other words, through

language Latin American poets were attempting to forge a unity throughout Latin America that their politics did not provide.

Even though the poetic tradition of the American epic is continuous in Latin America, the tradition is more pronounced in the United States.<sup>5</sup> In 1807 Joel Barlow made the first attempt in his *Columbiad*, a work that traces the visions of the Americas granted to Columbus. The poem, like later poetic attempts, is highly self-conscious. Right from the beginning Barlow evokes its relation to European epics:

I sing the Mariner who first unfurl'd  
An eastern banner o'er the western world  
And taught mankind where future empires lay (1, 1-3)

His beginning, "I sing," emulates the traditional openings of poets like Homer and Virgil. He first introduces the hero and then embarks on a tale of the progress of freedom in the Americas. Along the way he uses traditional epic devices, such as a focus on superhuman activities, catalogues, and epic couplets. Barlow tried to create an American epic to provide direction to American poetry and culture; however, his conception of the epic, like Bello's, relies heavily on European models. Like Bello he assumes that the United States needs a native Virgil, not, as later poets claim, a new paradigm. That the *Columbiad* fails in creating an American epic was as critically accepted in its period as it is now. The traditional epic is not suited to the New World, as Bello's and Barlow's failed attempts show. One reason for this problem is that the individual in the Americas needed to be defined first before defining the national identity. Barlow's *Columbiad* is important primarily in that it launched the American epic project in Anglo America.

In the years after Barlow, many theorists explored the idea of what the American poet needed to possess. In his influential essay “The Poet”(1844), Ralph Waldo Emerson outlined his ideas on the need for an American poet:

I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. We do not, with sufficient plainness, or sufficient profoundness, address ourselves to life, nor dare we chant our own times and social circumstance. If we filled the day with bravery, we should not shrink from celebrating it . . . We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer. (179)

For Emerson the potential for great poets already existed in the United States, but up to that point American poets had not focused on the actual experience of Americans, barbarous though it might seem at first. To create a new American tradition, the American poet must mold the raw materials of the United States with a spirit like that of Homer, with the epic spirit. Many thinkers had ideas similar to those of Emerson. For example, a few years earlier in 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville discusses the qualities that he envisions for the future of American poetry—he agrees with Emerson when he states, “there are no American poets” (485). Tocqueville explains, “Democracy shuts the past to poetry but opens the future . . . None of the single, nearly equal, roughly similar citizens of a democracy will do as a subject for poetry, but the nation itself calls for poetic treatment” (485). Tocqueville posits the need for a work, an epic, concerning the nation and an epic that treats the problem of the lacking personality of American citizens; moreover, Tocqueville’s words can easily function as a preface for Whitman’s attempt at an American epic in *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>6</sup>

Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is considered by many critics, such as Roy Harvey Pearce, James Miller, and Jeffrey Walker, as the foundation of the epic in the United

States.<sup>7</sup> Ezra Pound in 1909 declared of Whitman, “He *is* America” (*Selected Prose* 59). Later versions of the American epic relate to Whitman’s work—they are all Whitmanesque in their desires and deviations. Pearce stresses this quality by stating that all American poets go to Whitman before starting the epic (101). This is especially true within the last hundred years among poets like Ezra Pound in *Cantos*, Hart Crane in *The Bridge*, William Carlos Williams in *Paterson*, Charles Olson in *The Maximus Poems*, and John Berryman in *Dream Songs*. These works, as Pearce notes, share the fact that the poet is the hero and that the poet is struggling to create something of himself (134). These poets, like those of Latin America, felt a need to create a national work, a work that ties the pieces of a sprawling country into one whole with a shared mythology and a shared history, which suggests that poets in the Americas do not view the epic in the same manner as Bakhtin in *Dialogic Imagination*. Bakhtin argues that the epic concerns a national past, but one that is distant from the contemporary world so that the poet has no access to it (13). This distance allows for valorizing tradition and the past; as he says, “all really good things . . . occur only in the past” (15).<sup>8</sup> While Bakhtin believes that the epic stresses this point, he disagrees with it. For the classical epic, Bakhtin’s comments apply, but not for American epics, in which poets write not about past history but contemporary history. They do not valorize the tradition unless they are attempting to show how they have overcome it; rather, they view their tasks as explorations in historiography.

## II. Whitman’s and Neruda’s Lyric-Epics

Whitman and Neruda faced many of the problems of other American poets, such as pulling away from European paradigms, fashioning convincing New World epic

heroes, and presenting the community through the individual, but still both desired to write an epic. For Whitman that desire formed in the 1840s, and he spent the remainder of his life working on it. Numerous critics, most emphatically Harold Bloom, note Whitman's reading of Emerson during the 1840s, despite Whitman's claims later in life not to have read Emerson; they also suggest that Whitman takes his ideas on the American epic poet from Emerson, yet Whitman's reasons for writing an American epic are complex (3). Like Emerson he declares his desire to capture the place and time, to proclaim a unique social and political identity for the United States. Closely tied to this idea, Whitman expresses the desire to provide witness to American events. Since epics provide foundational texts, Whitman desires a poem with a national scope to distinguish American literature. Whitman believes that contemporary American literature relies too heavily on European literature. To address this concern, Whitman wants a literature specifically American. He believes in democracy, and it is his democratic ideals that foster his belief in the need for an American poetry. George Kateb suggests that this belief inspires Whitman to be one of the best thinkers on democracy ever (240). Kateb's evaluation of the importance of Whitman's democratic ideas is clearly debatable, especially since Whitman in his poetry seldom deals with the day-to-day functioning of a democracy as much as with the comprehensive theory of it, but Kateb does note the connection between democracy and the American poet. For Whitman, America needs new poetry to match its new political system. In other words, Whitman considered the democratic laws of the United States an experiment. To succeed he suggests that the United States must have a democratic culture to foster democratic institutions. America must have a religion, rituals, ceremonies, traditions, and histories



that foster democratic thought. Through fostering such a culture, Whitman believes that the United States will be able to produce great works of art and great people. In

*Democratic Vistas*, Whitman states this desire:

Our fundamental want to-day in the United States, with closest, amplest reference to present conditions, and to the future, is of a class, and the clear idea of a class, of native authors, literatures, far different, far higher in grade, than any yet known, sacerdotal, modern, fit to cope with our occasions, lands, permeating the whole mass of American mentality, taste, belief, breathing into it a new breath of life, giving it decision, affecting politics far more than the popular superficial suffrage, with results inside and underneath the elections of Presidents, or Congresses—radiating, begetting appropriate teachers, schools, manners, and, as its grandest result, accomplishing . . . a religious and moral character beneath the political and productive and intellectual bases of the States. (956)

To create this class of writers is Whitman's fundamental desire in *Leaves of Grass*. He believes in the efficacy of literature in performing this task; the poet, for Whitman, "shapes aggregates and individuals" (957). For these reasons Whitman created *Leaves of Grass* as the American lyric-epic, and in it he introduces ideals that he sets forth as essential for democratic culture: union, camaraderie/fraternity, freedom, individuality, and progress. In the 1876 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman calls the work "a radical utterance" (1035) born out of democracy. He imagined that his utterance would reshape American life.

Pablo Neruda intimately knew Whitman's ideas for creating an American epic, and in *Canto general*, he expresses many of the same ideas. While writing *Canto general*, Neruda told Maurice Halperin that he was working on a poem which "will attempt to reveal the deep process of historic transformation through which Chile has passed. I want to counter-balance the effect of the great poetry of the classics, such as Ercilla and Pedro de Oña" (168). Neruda also said of *Canto general*:

After my visit to Macchu Picchu, I conceived the idea of singing the American man . . . My continuous experience and contacts with social struggles were sinking into me and with them began to germinate the idea of writing an epic poem to express the reality of our America. (qtd. in Valenzuela 85)

Like Whitman, Neruda has past epic poets in mind while writing *Canto general*, but he wants to create a poetic tradition in Latin America. He also desires to act as a poet of witness—the function of witness is much more pronounced in Neruda’s work than in Whitman’s. Of *Canto general* he states, “There have been many writers who felt primary duties toward the geography and citizenry of Latin America. To unite our continent, to discover it, to build it, that was my purpose” (qtd. in Santí’s “*Canto General*” 258). As with Whitman, Neruda writes *Canto general* in order to produce a foundational work for his society. Also, as with Whitman, Neruda believes in the persuasive function of poetry in creating a political culture necessary for a political institution. In Neruda’s case, however, poetry comes before the establishment of the political reversal. A democracy was already in place for Whitman. *Canto general* is as much a founding text of Latin America as it is a call for communism in the continent. Whereas Whitman rewrites history in *Leaves of Grass* to support the progress of democracy in the West, Neruda rewrites history to show the inevitable progress of communism. For Neruda, his epic poem must help create the cultural and political environment through which the despots of Latin America will be deposed in favor of communism.

Whitman knew the traditional epic would not function to found a new American tradition; it was too laden with European precedents, but he wanted to draw upon traditional epic characteristics. To do this, he combined the epic with the lyric.

Considering his focus on the individual as central to democracy, his use of the lyric as the carrier of choice is not a surprise. Traditionally the lyric has been associated with the lyric “I,” an aspect that Whitman uses to display the paradigm of the democratic individual in poems like *Song of Myself*. Often, critics mention that by focusing on a specific “I” at a specific moment the lyric has the capabilities to freeze that moment. In other words, by seeing how one person confronts a specific situation, we can see a connection to how we as human beings would experience the situation; thus, the specific moment of the poem becomes timeless. Hank Lazer elaborates on this idea by stating that “the lyrical depends upon breaking, temporarily, the relationship of the part to the whole, of heightening the importance of the moment, of giving the moment an engaging shape” (36). Since Whitman believes that a poet should illuminate the present, he uses the lyric to provide an individual reaction to contemporary experience. This focus on the individual as a unit instead of as a hero in a story, as usually occurs in a traditional epic, stresses the importance of the individual’s role in American society, or rather the importance that Whitman would like to see the individual have. The focus on the individual also allows Whitman to present more than one version of the “I.” He can include the “I” in a heroic position and not worry about a consistent portrayal. The “I” of Whitman in *Leaves of Grass* can shift, and that shifting stresses the diversity of the individual in American society. Moreover, traditionally the lyric is thought of, as John Stuart Mill states, as an “utterance that is overheard” (12). T.S. Eliot describes this quality of the lyric as “the voice of the poet talking to himself – or to nobody” (96). Since Whitman wants his work to instill a democratic way of thinking in the reader, using a form with such immediacy can help connect Whitman to the reader on a personal level,

to create the effect at times of speaking directly to the reader or of Whitman being overheard thinking to himself. In addition, the lyric is often described as related to song, as brief, as oral in nature, and as intensely personal. Whitman draws on each of these attributes in an attempt to craft a specifically American epic.

But the lyric on its own is not capable of the task of nation building, as Theodor Adorno's article "On Lyric Poetry and Society" shows. For Adorno, the poet in writing the lyric creates something that is wholly individual. Adorno and critics following him like Hugh Grady and Michael Heller suggest that this process of creating something individual distinguishes the "I" as distinct from the collective. Adorno states, "The 'I' whose voice is heard in the lyric is an 'I' that defines and expresses itself as something opposed to the collective" (41). This aspect of the lyric causes some obvious problems for Whitman, for among poetic genres the lyric alone fosters a separation from the collective, but Whitman is attempting in his work to show how the individual works in the Union and still remains an individual. Writing a traditional epic alone would not allow Whitman to avoid such a problem encountered with the lyric, and it was out of this situation that the lyric-epic was born.

In the lyric-epic, the lyric and epic elements are combined, and *Leaves of Grass*, following James Miller's terminology, is a lyric-epic (147). The text is a patchwork of lyrics that is pieced together to create an epic. Whitman essentially takes the episodic nature of the traditional epic and splits it into numerous pieces with a sparse narrative connecting thread. It is not clear whether or not he theorized this form before writing or that in collecting the pieces for the first edition that he discovered the form in arranging the pieces. What is clear is that the form became important, and he revised *Leaves of*

*Grass* many times to create the proper form. In the first editions of *Leaves of Grass*, a specific narrative line for the epic did not exist; the work primarily focused on presenting the democratic American individual as a paradigm for the reader. As *Leaves of Grass* grew through new editions, Whitman introduced a narrative thread to the work, providing both introductory and concluding poems.<sup>9</sup> In the later editions, the work breaks down into sections that follow a basic narrative, even if several critics disagree as to where the splits are to be made.<sup>10</sup> Essentially, the work starts with introductory poems, moves to poems of a new American identity, explores the love of comrades, shifts to a section on the Civil War, moves to exploring spirituality, and then finishes with parting songs. In the last edition, there were also annexes written from the perspective of old age.

One benefit of the lyric nature of Whitman's lyric-epic is that it allows for growth; lyrics could be added, deleted, or shifted fairly easily without destroying the nature of the narrative. Plus, the patchwork of individual pieces together makes up a whole that resembles the numerous individuals that come together to create the Union. At its most basic, the lyric-epic suits the worldview that Whitman tries to espouse. On a more complicated level, Whitman takes elements from both the lyric and epic traditions of the Old World and attempts to structure them into a new American form. He believes that the old forms contain in part the political hierarchies of Europe, so by creating a new American style, he wants to infuse the new form with a democratic sensibility.

Whitman's innovations opened the field for poets in Anglo and Latin America. He provided a stepping off point that many poets, like Williams, Darío, and Berryman, attempted to follow, but in many ways Neruda is the poetic inheritor who writes a work

with the most similar vision to that of *Leaves of Grass*, which is not to say that Neruda took Whitman's lyric-epic and simply copied it; rather, like Dante looking back to Virgil as a mentor, he takes the lyric-epic form that Whitman developed and infuses it with a Latin American worldview, more specifically with his communist ideology. Neruda states that Whitman was the first American poetic voice, and many poets and critics, such as Victor Valenzuela, state that Neruda was the first poetic voice of Latin America (81).

Before turning to Neruda's version of the lyric-epic, it is necessary to mention that there was a lyric tradition in Anglo and Latin America when Whitman and Neruda wrote. Compared to a poet like William Cullen Bryant, Whitman's work is definitely innovative. Neruda's work, on the other hand, was formally similar to poets writing in Latin America during his time. More than Whitman, he drew on the traditions of the lyric in his writing. If anything was specifically innovative about his work among his contemporaries, it was his focus on politics. Yet, the lyric alone is not a nation-building piece—it lacks a central force important to Whitman's and Neruda's goals—, so while a discussion of the history of epic in the Americas helps explain their desires to write an epic, a similar discussion of the history of the lyric in the Americas would not serve our present purpose. The lyric alone could not achieve what these two poets were aiming for, nor could the epic by itself.

The actual form of Neruda's lyric-epic follows Whitman's in *Leaves of Grass* somewhat loosely. In *Canto general* the work consists of numerous lyrics tied together by an overarching yet fragmented narrative. Unlike Whitman, Neruda brings a timeline

into the narrative. In general the work begins with a new genesis in Latin America and moves to the present day. More specifically, the work is structured as follows:

Section I: Latin American genesis;

Section II: Neruda's claim to be able to sing for Latin Americans;

Section III: A presentation of colonial Europeans and their barbarous actions;

Section IV: A description of Latin American liberators;

Sections V-VI: Poems about those who betrayed Latin American freedom;

Sections VII-VIII: Images of Chile and voices of dead Latin Americans;

Section IX: Call for the people of Latin America rise up;

Section X: Neruda's own fugitive experience;

Section XI: Poems concerning the people's ability to endure suffering through  
unity;

Section XII: Song for dead poets;

Section XIII: Poems from the national poet to Chileans;

Section XIV: Songs of the ocean;

Section XV: Parting poems.

This structure is more complicated than Whitman's; however, the basic narrative push in *Canto general* is the history of communism's growth under tyranny and through liberty in Latin America. Because of Neruda's political focus, he does not, as Whitman does, use the lyric to treat primarily the poetic "I." In a certain sense, Neruda tries to remove the poetic ego from the lyric-epic. In other words, Whitman's work centers on introducing the reader to a paradigmatic American "I." Whitman's version of the American individual, as many Americans, is often seen as overly insular, as only concerned with

itself.<sup>11</sup> Through interpreting Whitman Neruda attempts to present a more citizen-oriented style. Many of the lyrics in *Canto general* are written from the perspective of other people, of dead workers, of poor people, of departed poets. Neruda attempts to shift the focus away from how the individual stays an individual within the Union to showing how the individual works with a union that is created by individuals. Since Neruda believes that Whitman is a poet of the people, Neruda takes Whitman's lyric-epic and tries to create a lyric-epic that is still focused on the people but from a communist perspective, which is not to suggest that the individual is not important to Neruda's work. Like Whitman in *Song of Myself*, Neruda in *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* (*The Heights of Macchu Picchu*) makes his claim to be a worthwhile poet of the Americas in an individual experience. In these sections of *Leaves of Grass* and *Canto general*, Whitman and Neruda start with a lyric moment as a foundation for their democratic and communist political systems respectively. As the works progress, Whitman focuses on an individual's freedom, and Neruda focuses on an individual's responsibility towards others.

Besides sharing similar theoretical concerns for writing an American lyric-epic, Whitman and Neruda draw upon several common epic and lyric strategies. First, they attempt to provide what Northrop Frye labels the "encyclopedic" form of the epic (56). They include catalogues which act to chronicle the variety of their periods. Next, they attempt to create foundational myths for their societies. This attempt includes forming new languages, politics, and religious forms for their country members. Even more, they both draw upon biblical tones or the high style of epic. Considering that both works were intended as foundational for their societies, the biblical tones act to mimic the Bible



as well as to create new bibles for their cultures. Like Virgil who expresses the inevitability of Rome, both poets express the inevitability of their perfect societies. Though they differ as to the content of those societies, they hold several ideas in common, such as the importance of the people and the need for the people to have independent cultural traditions. Also, both writers engage a main character, who in both cases is the poetic “I,” whose experiences form the structural basis of the works. Concerning the traditional lyric strategies, both poets at times create poems that appear to let the reader in on a personal revelation. In addition, many of the poems rely on the lyric quality of breaking the temporal, of heightening the importance of the moment.<sup>12</sup> Whitman uses this quality for stressing the individual, while Neruda uses this temporal rift to show the relationship between the part and the whole. The poets both use the lyric “I” to explore themes that are not only personally important, but also important to the community.

Beyond these traditional characteristics, *Leaves of Grass* and *Canto general* share many other characteristics. First, each writer uses a shifting “I” to explore his main themes. In *Leaves of Grass*, there are several versions of the poetic “I”; furthermore, Whitman confronts the reader with the impossibility of designating an identity for his poetic “I.” Neruda, on the other hand, uses the “I” to shift personas. The “I” shifts from Neruda the poet to numerous figures speaking about their experiences and ideals. Several reasons emerge for the poetic “I” in both poems. The poetic “I” acts as a democratic figure. For Whitman, the poetic “I” offers the only serious option for a poem which is intended to strengthen the democratic spirit. For Neruda, the “I” also acts symbolically in the position of pure democracy. In his case the “I” shifts to create

the perception of a pure democratic process, i.e. communism, that is composed of myriad individual actions. In other words, for Neruda there can be no single hero but instead heroes, since a single hero would be representative of an aristocratic/capitalistic legacy. Second, both writers engage in a progressive rewriting of history. Third, both writers engage in the mythification of Native Americans. Whitman mentions Native Americans, but he does not engage in their specific problems. Neruda discusses the Araucanians as a major component of Chilean history; however, his portrayal of the necessary destruction of native tribes has been the center of much critical lambasting of his knowledge of them. Fourth, both writers stress the primacy of fraternity or comradeship. Whitman considers fraternity to be essential to democracy. Neruda considers comradeship as a basis for communism. Fifth, as mentioned above, both writers share a belief in the education of the individual in a new language. Their works attempt to create this new language for their people. Whitman conceived *Leaves of Grass* as a “language experiment”; he intends to create a new language to match the experiment of democracy in the United States. Neruda attempts to create a new language to function as a means of expression for people to pass beyond capitalism. Sixth, both writers use nature images to symbolize the people, and they both state that each person can be a poet. Many other similarities between the writers exist, such as content similarities, including a stress on erotic love, the body, the physical, and anti-intellectualism, and textual similarities, including alliteration, parallel constructions, and enumeration.<sup>13</sup>

Before discussing the works in detail, some explanation is necessary of why a Chilean poet, thousands of miles from the United States, chose a poet writing nearly a

hundred years before him as a *maestro* and why comparing the two works sheds light on both.

### III. Neruda's Whitman

Many critics, such as Gordon Brotherson and Roberto González Echevarría, note a similarity between Whitman and Neruda, and James Nolan has written a book comparing them. Biographically, Walt Whitman's influence in Latin America has been widely documented in studies by writers ranging from Fernando Alegría to Octavio Paz. In "The Accidental Tourist: Walt Whitman in Latin America," Enrico Mario Santí documents Whitman's effect on writers like Neruda, Paz, and Borges. Santí argues that Whitman is a cult figure in Latin America—this cult status descends from José Martí's writings on Whitman after having seen him present one of his famous Lincoln lectures (159). The relation between Neruda and Whitman has also been widely discussed.<sup>14</sup>

Neruda claims that he first read Whitman's works at the age of fifteen. At eighteen he wrote a review of a translation of Whitman's poetry. Late in life Neruda discusses Whitman in an article entitled "Vengo a renegociar mi deuda con Walt Whitman" ("We live in a Whitmanesque Age"):<sup>15</sup>

Por mi parte, yo, que tengo ahora cerca de 70 años, descubrí a Walt Whitman cuando tenía sólo 15, y lo consideré mi más grande acreedor. Estoy ante vosotros, sintiendo que le guardo para siempre la mas grande y maravillosa deuda que me ha ayudado a existir . . . Soy un poeta de habla hispana que Walt Whitman me ha enseñado más que el Cervantes . . . La queja del bardo sobre la poderosa influencia de Europa de la cual la literatura de su época continuó obteniendo su sustento. En verdad él, Walt Whitman, fue el protagonista de una verdadera personalidad geográfica: el primer hombre de la historia en hablar con auténtica voz continental, en sustentar un auténtico nombre americano. (748)

As for myself, now a man of almost seventy, I was barely fifteen when I discovered Walt Whitman, my primary creditor. I stand here among you today still owing this marvelous debt that has helped me to live . . . I, a

poet who writes in Spanish, learned more from Walt Whitman than from Cervantes . . . The bard complained of the all-powerful European influence that continued to dominate the literature of his time. In fact, it was he, Walt Whitman, in the persona of a specific geography, who for the first time in history brought honor to an American name.<sup>16</sup>

This quotation shows Neruda's close feelings for Whitman, but more than his close feelings, the quotation reveals that Neruda thinks of Whitman as a poet of America. In his memoir Neruda discusses Whitman as a "positive hero" (*Confieso* 294), and he wrote many poems in which Whitman figures, including "Ode to Walt Whitman":

Yo no recuerdo  
a qué edad,  
ni dónde,  
si en el gran Sur mojado  
o en la costa  
temible, bajo el breve  
grito de las gaviotas,  
toqué una mano y era  
la mano de Walt Whitman:  
pisé la tierra  
con los pies desnudos,  
anduve sobre el pasto,  
sobre el firme rocío  
de Walt Whitman. (1-14)

I do not remember  
at what age  
nor where; in the great damp South  
or on the fearsome  
coast, beneath the brief  
cry of the seagulls,  
I touched a hand and it was  
the hand of Walt Whitman.  
I trod the ground  
with bare feet,  
I walked on the grass,  
on the firm dew  
of Walt Whitman.

A few lines later Neruda states, “tú / me enseñaste / a ser americano” (31-33) (“You / taught me / how to be an American”). In *Canto general*, Neruda calls on Whitman as he would a classical muse:

¡Dame tu voz y el peso de tu pecho enterrado  
Walt Whitman, y las graves  
raíces de tu rostro  
para cantar estas reconstrucciones! (“Yo también más allá de tus tierras”  
63-66)

Give me your voice and the weight of your buried breast  
Walt Whitman, and the solemn  
roots of your face  
to sing these reconstructions!<sup>17</sup>

At several moments in his life, Neruda translated poems from *Leaves of Grass*, and it is well-known that Neruda always kept at least one portrait of Whitman on his writing desk. In his memoir he tells a story of the picture. One day a gardener saw the picture and asked if the man was his grandfather. Neruda answered yes (Johnson’s “Neruda’s Impressions” 98).

Besides Whitman’s poetry, the mythic image of Whitman, partially based on his life and partially based on Martí’s presentation of him, that pervaded Latin America influenced Neruda. For example, Whitman was from a working-class family and was active in politics. He worked as an editor for several newspapers, most with a democratic party slant. He was a delegate in Buffalo for the Free Soil Party, campaigned for Martin Van Buren, and worked for the Department of the Interior and the Attorney General’s office. Due to his own working-class background and political life, Neruda felt personal ties with Whitman, although Neruda was more influential as a politician. From his student days, he was active in leftist politics in Santiago. Later he held positions as consul in Ceylon, Java, Singapore, and Spain; moreover, he was the

consul general of Mexico, the ambassador to France, a Chilean senator, and, for a brief period, a candidate for the Chilean presidency. He was an active member of the Communist Party of Chile, and this affiliation was the cause of his exile during the period that he was writing *Canto general*. Partially due to Whitman's background, Neruda looked upon him as a poet of the people. Whatever it was that originally drew Neruda to Whitman's work and persona, Neruda eventually came to see Whitman as the quintessential American poet and the poet from whom he could learn how to create an American epic work. When Neruda wrote *Canto general*, he, like poets in the United States, turned to Whitman as a predecessor. González Echevarría even suggests that *Canto general*, *General Song*, gains its title in opposition to Whitman's *Song of Myself*—instead of writing about the individual, Neruda wanted to write a song for all (6). But more than volleying names, the two works are similar in purpose, style, content, and imagery. Neruda took up the mantle of the bardic American poet from Whitman.

#### IV. Latin vs. Anglo: Diverging Myths

Besides having similar epic urges, several differences exist between the Latin American and the Anglo American literary traditions that require noting before we turn to Whitman's and Neruda's versions of the lyric-epic. Many thinkers since colonization have put forward polarities that they consider crucial for understanding the Americas; Román de la Campa summarizes what he views as the most influential: "civilization/barbarism, Anglo/Latin, North/South, capitalism/one-man rule . . . postmodernity/subalternity, civil society/chaos, global order/ungovernable cultures" (373). Many other divisions have been used to classify Anglo versus Latin America, such as First World/Third World, power/silence, and imperial power/subjects. Several

differences between Latin and Anglo America that underscore the discussions in this study are historical. The most obvious historical distinction is discussed by Octavio Paz: "We are the children of the Counter Reformation and the Spanish Empire; they are children of Luther and the Industrial Revolution" (175). The Protestant versus Catholic colonization of Latin and Anglo America has created several fundamental differences often noted. First, Latin America, as Richard Morse mentions, is more centralized than Anglo America (99). During the colonization, the Catholic church provided a center for the different colonies. The people were part of a community that had central leaders. The church provided higher educational facilities from an early period, with universities that focused on a type of medieval scholasticism founded in developing cities. The different communities all had at the center the church to relate to, whereas in Anglo America, the Protestants focused on individuals being left free to commune with God. Besides the colonial governments, no central power existed to tie large communities together. The states formed as individual governing systems, so when freedom was gained in the U.S., it was accepted and expected as a result of colonial life.

Contributing to the centralization of Latin America is also the colonization of native populations. In Latin America, especially in Central and Northern South America, Native American tribes were centralized. For example, the tribes surrounding the Aztecs were accustomed to paying tribute to the Aztecs because of their role as a central power. When the Spaniards overtook the Aztecs, they grasped the central position of power. In large parts of South America, this overcoming of the central tribes

amounted to a takeover of the native populations.<sup>18</sup> Native tribes were often incorporated into the new society even if in socially inferior positions.

In contrast, in Anglo America, Native American tribes were not often centralized in large groups. Essentially, there were numerous tribes to fight once any given tribe was conquered. Thus, in North America the progress West involved continued skirmishes rather than any definitive conquest and assimilation or subjugation; hence, there was less intermixing of natives and European descendants. On the one hand, the centralized power of Native Americans in Central and South America helped create a centralized society of Latin America, whereas the continual conflict with individual tribes fostered a sense of protecting the individual in Anglo America.

Additionally, when educational systems were developed in the United States, they were intended for the benefit of all, unlike in Latin America, where the educational systems were a mirror of the European systems, primarily intended for the wealthy or the religious. Octavio Paz believes that this difference creates a conception of reality as stable for Latin Americans and progressive for North Americans (175-176). Many critics, such as Victor Valenzuela and Gordon Brotherston, agree with him. Valenzuela argues that time moves from the future to the present in North America and from the future to the past in Latin America (11-13). He means that Latin Americans long for a better future but are hampered by fears of the past, whereas North Americans live with a sense of acceleration.

Some features of Latin and Anglo American literature stem from these differences. For example, Latin American writers tend to focus on the collective more than the individual; this can be seen in works like *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred*



*Years of Solitude*) and *Ficciones* (*Fictions*).<sup>19</sup> In Anglo America the individual is raised to the position of hero: Ishmael, Hester Prynne, and Huck Finn. Another difference between Latin and Anglo America that stems from centralization is the position of the writer in relation to society. It is practically a truism in North American criticism to state that a writer has little influence, if any, on society; popular images portray writers as nonconformists in search of original art; moreover, Anglo American writers have a tendency to avoid political matters. Stemming from the nineteenth century, Latin American writers often take up the position of political reformers; this stance is especially true of Chilean writers—Jean Franco suggests that it descends from Chilean poets' working-class backgrounds (264). Latin American writers often assume the position of being the conscience of society; their positions as more valuable to society aid in this perception. Also, there is a difference between textuality and immanence in Latin and Anglo America. Roberto González Echevarría argues that Latin America is grounded in texts ("Latin America" 52). With the colonization of Latin America, European-style universities were set up. This system helped foster a sense of educational and textual grounding. In other words, Latin Americans were educated through texts already present. Due to this textual education, Latin American writers feel the sense of having a textual past in a way that Anglo American writers do not. As noted earlier, Anglo American writers stress their own experience in the present. Instead of relying on texts and understanding a textual past, Anglo American writers have been content with their own experience as precedent.

Pointing out these few differences between Anglo and Latin America helps focus the differences between Neruda and Whitman and reveals what Neruda gained from

Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. First, Whitman is more interested in the individual than Neruda, who stresses the individual's place within a collective with centralized power. Second, Whitman does not focus on numerous specific instances in the past, whereas Neruda spends much of *Canto general* discussing past action, so much so that some critics, like Lois Zamora, view the work as focused on the past (13). Unlike many Anglo American writers, Whitman understands himself as an engaged writer in politics; Neruda understands the poet's role as directly involved in current struggles. Lastly, while Whitman believes that American literature has not been written and that Anglo Americans are relying too much on European sources, he does not suggest that Anglo Americans are outcasts from a textual tradition. Neruda expresses a sense of isolation, as if within their inherited European tradition, Latin Americans stand to the side.<sup>20</sup>

Before turning to Whitman, a few last points about Pablo Neruda must be made. Neruda is different from many Latin American writers because his focus is the future in *Canto general*. Valenzuela states that Latin American writers long for the future but are hampered by fears of the past (11). Such is not the case with Neruda. Following Whitman's example, Neruda turns his vision towards the future. It suffices to say here that Neruda is more concerned with specific events in the past than Whitman; however, Neruda writes *Canto general* in an attempt to create a certain type of communist reader and to start a new literary and political tradition for Latin America. He hopes that his work will act as a foundational piece that will help shift Latin Americans from their fears of the past to a dream of a united future. Neruda was influenced in this hope by Whitman, so before exploring Neruda's *Canto general*, this study examines Whitman's political goals, his use of camaraderie, his vision of history, and his aesthetics of reader

participation in *Leaves of Grass*. This structure does not suggest that Neruda was a lesser poet than Whitman or that he took Whitman's start and made a work that functioned better. This structure echoes a basic premise of this study, which is that Whitman and Neruda are poets who are equal in founding the literary cultures of their countries. In exploring their works together, the study can demonstrate how Neruda uses Whitman's work as a paradigm to found a literary culture just as rich as that which Whitman began in Anglo America but ultimately different. In looking at these two founding works together, distinctions and similarities between Anglo and Latin American writers as well as between two great poets who wrote similar works are highlighted.

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gwen Kirkpatrick argues that *Canto general* is *the* epic work which sets the ground for all later Latin American poetry ("Dos poemas" 160).

<sup>2</sup> My use of lyric-epic comes from James Miller's *America's Lyric-Epic of Self and Democracy*. See 25.

<sup>3</sup> Translation by Barabara Huntley and Pilar Liria.

<sup>4</sup> Simón Bolívar wanted to tie Latin America into one republic. José Enrique Rodó in *Ariel* made an influential call for Latin American unity. Politically, at many moments in Latin American history motivation existed to foster a composite Latin America, as events like the Pan-American Congress in 1906 show.

<sup>5</sup> The English and French Canadian tradition of the epic is the least pronounced on the continent, although some critics, like James Johnson, have chosen to discuss works by E.J. Pratt and Louis Fréchette as epics.

<sup>6</sup> Other writers, such as the members of "Young America," including Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allen Poe, discuss the idea of an American poet. Also, for a good examination of Whitman fulfilling Tocqueville's ideas see H. Keith Monroe's "Tocqueville, Whitman and the Poetry of Democracy."

<sup>7</sup> See Pearce's *The Continuity of American Poetry*, Miller's *The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction: Whitman's Legacy in the Personal Epic*, and Walker's *Bardic Ethos and the American Epic Poem* for discussions of Whitman as the founding writer of the American epic.

<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin's suggestion is that any national work of contemporary relevance will now be written in the novel, and many critics agree, arguing that works like *Moby Dick*, *Beloved*, and *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) are epic works. As early as Fielding novelists were considering themselves as inheritors of the epic tradition, and in a way, they are, for the traditional epic is difficult to produce, if not invalid in the New World. Admittedly, a study could be written on the dual inheritance, poetic and prose, of the epic in the Americas.

<sup>9</sup> See the sections *Inscriptions* and *Songs at Parting*.

<sup>10</sup> See Miller's *Leaves* 75. Miller assumes there are three major parts of *Leaves of Grass* which are surrounded by introductory and concluding poems.

<sup>11</sup> From the time of the Monroe Doctrine to the present day, critics from both outside and inside the U.S. have complained of the insular nature of American concerns.

<sup>12</sup> See Hank Lazer's "The Lyric Valuables: Soundings, Questions, & Examples" for a discussion on lyric temporal distortions.

<sup>13</sup> Neruda and Whitman both posit anti-intellectual sentiments, yet in both cases their comments appear as posturing. Neruda trained in French at the University in Santiago, and Whitman, though not college educated, was a voracious reader. In both cases the posturing seems linked to their desires to be an image of the common human, a necessary political image in democracy and communism.

<sup>14</sup> See Santi's "The Accidental Tourist: Walt Whitman in Latin America," Larry Stone's "The Continental Voice: Whitman's Influence on Pablo Neruda," Peter Earle's "Whitman and Neruda and their Implicit Cultural Revolution," Jaime Alazraki's "Neruda y Borges: Dos Rostros de Walt Whitman," or James Nolan's *Poet Chief* for Whitman's influence on Neruda.

<sup>15</sup> This is the usual English translation of the title. A more literal translation would be "I've Come to Renegotiate my Debt with Whitman." Neruda is playing on the idea of Latin America's financial debt to the United States.

<sup>16</sup> From Peden's translation in *Passions and Impressions*.

<sup>17</sup> All the translations of *Canto general*, unless otherwise noted, are Jack Schmitt's.

<sup>18</sup> This is not true with regard to the colonization of Chile. As in the United States, in the area of Chile, native tribes were not centralized; thus, conquering a whole tribe was not always possible. After the Spaniards, the Chilean government finally

came to a peace with the Araucanian Native Americans when it realized the difficulty of defeating everyone.

<sup>19</sup> There are individual heroes in Latin America, such as Martin Fierro; however, most Latin American characters are engaged in a collective. There is not as much focus on their individual actions as on their actions in regard to the collective.

<sup>20</sup> Both Pablo Neruda and Gabriel García Márquez in their Nobel lectures mention the isolation of Latin America in the Western tradition. In fact, the title of García Márquez's lecture, "The Solitude of Latin America," reflects this issue.

## Chapter 2: Whitman, the Local “Loco-Foco”

The trouble is that writers are too literary . . . . Instead of regarding literature as only a weapon, an instrument, in the service of something larger than itself, it looks at itself as an end—as a fact to be finally worshipped, adored. To me that’s a horrible blasphemy—a bad smelling apostasy.

Whitman (qtd. in Beach<sup>18</sup>)

Radical democrat, republican, liberal democrat, socialist, artisanal democrat, conservative, leftist, radical leftist—these are just some of the labels attached to Walt Whitman. From the earliest critical studies of Whitman, the political nature of his poetry has been discussed, dismissed, and disputed.<sup>1</sup> In order to explain how Whitman’s politics is central to *Leaves of Grass*, his lyric-epic, Whitman’s political goals should be explored. Rather than listing his ideals, we can begin with his history just prior to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* because the first edition, as Betsy Erkkila notes, was born of political fury and frustration (3). Before Whitman became an active poet, he was active in editing party newspapers, electioneering, party organizing, and working for the government. He abandoned these pursuits to write *Leaves of Grass*. In that book he displays an alternate political path to the one he was attempting in the years before it. As such, the book grew out of his disappointment in contemporary politics and his optimism for the future. Exploring his political actions and beliefs before *Leaves of Grass* will aid in understanding the reason for its existence and why the lyric-epic was an appropriate format.

### I. Whitman’s Political Roots

From 1830 to 1848 Whitman edited eight newspapers and contributed to over twenty others. Jerome Loving states that Whitman’s journalism is known for its working-class allegiance (104). In his times Whitman was known as a liberal.<sup>2</sup> In the

newspapers he championed improved schools, opposition to the death penalty, fair wages, public parks, affordable housing, temperance, public education, clean water, clean streets, women's rights, and the preservation of Native American heritage. On economic issues he advocated free trade, hard money, and open immigration. Above all in his journalism, Whitman preached a libertarian agenda; he advocated freedom and local sovereignty, which is not surprising considering the Jeffersonian/Jacksonian political beliefs of his father. In Jeffersonian fashion, Whitman was against government regulation of businesses (Cmiel 211). On April 4, 1846, in the *Eagle* he states that “the best government is that which governs least” (318). This sentiment is echoed in other Transcendentalists' works; in fact, it shows up word for word at the beginning of Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*. Whitman has a strong distrust of the state—liberty for him implies freedom from central state political coercion. He believed that democracy remained an experiment, and he was not alone in this thought. Contemporary Europeans still questioned the basic premise of democracy: the sovereignty of the people. For example, Simonde de Sismondi rejected the idea of the people's sovereignty, and Alexis de Tocqueville was not certain that the people's sovereignty could exist unchecked.<sup>3</sup> Unlike these writers Whitman trusts the basic instincts of the people; as Peter Balakian states, Whitman's politics stems from “a sacred notion of the common man” (71).<sup>4</sup> This belief descends from his working-class background and the jobs he had in youth.<sup>5</sup> Whitman defines democracy through its principles as he understood and championed them. First, for Whitman, the people are the source of power; civil authority should always override military authority. Second, he believes elections should be free to all. Third, he thinks there should be a complete

separation of church and state. Fourth, he argues that no offices or authority should be hereditary. Fifth, he believes no monopolies should be allowed. Sixth, he insists that the Union is above all important.

Whitman's views on politics, however, were too radical for many democrats and were the reason for his being fired from his last editorial post. During 1846-1848 Whitman edited the *Brooklyn Eagle*, a democratic party paper. In his position at this paper, he became a public figure due to the size of the paper's circulation; opposition party newspapers labeled him a local radical "locofoco."<sup>6</sup> Eventually, he lost this job because he went too far left in his editorials supporting the Wilmot Proviso. Proposed in 1846 by congressman Wilmot to president Polk, the Wilmot Proviso barred the extension of slavery into the Western states. Polk, for whom Whitman had campaigned, did not back the Wilmot Proviso since he did not want to anger the Southern senators.

Besides his activity in newsprint during these years just prior to his poetic endeavors, Whitman was active in party politics. For most of these years he was associated with the Democratic Party. He campaigned for Van Buren and Polk, giving speeches and performing outreach. He was active on local Democratic Party councils. Moreover, Whitman was involved in several protests, both as a participant and an organizer. For example, in 1841 he delivered a speech in front of thousands protesting Henry Clay's Fiscal Bank Bill (Arvin 11).<sup>7</sup> This detail is small; however, it is important for his later thoughts on political upheaval. Whitman, unlike European thinkers such as Tocqueville, thought that turbulence was not necessarily harmful for the society; rather, in Jeffersonian fashion he views political disturbances as a way of cleansing and refining the system. This belief can be seen later in his life during the Civil War, for he



understood the Civil War to be a turbulent event that would help strengthen the Union if it did not tear it apart.<sup>8</sup> In the late 1840s Whitman switched to the short lived Free Soil Party. Later in his life he became part of the newly formed Republican Party to support Abraham Lincoln.

In the early 1850s Whitman became disillusioned with party politics. He took up the view of party politics espoused by George Washington, who states, “division of the republic into two great parties . . . is to be dreaded as the greatest political evil under our Constitution” (qtd. in Remini 39). Party politics grew volatile briefly in the early 1850s, when the Whig party broke up. Whitman viewed this period as a time of political corruption. In his unpublished “The Eighteenth Presidency” (1856), he states:

At present, the personnel of the government of these thirty millions, in executives and elsewhere, is drawn from limber-tongued lawyers, very fluent but empty, feeble old men, professional politicians, dandies, dyspeptics, and so forth, and rarely drawn from the solid body of the people. (1331)

Whitman feared that government’s power would slip from the people partially due to party politics. In a section entitled “Are Not Political Parties About Played Out?” in “The Eighteenth Presidency,” he answers:

I say they are, all round. America has outgrown parties; henceforth it is too large, and they too small. They habitually make common cause just as soon in advocacy of the worst deeds and men as the best, or probably a little sooner for the worst. (1341)

Whitman was afraid that parties sacrificed democratic ideals for material wealth.<sup>9</sup> In the 1850s, partially due to party squabbling and corruption, he formulated his theory for political change through literature.

This belief, which is at the foundation of his lyric-epic and *Neruda’s*, began to develop in Whitman’s journalism. Whitman argued in several newspapers that a

newspaper functions to lead political opinion in the country. For example, on April 1, 1842, Whitman argues in the *New York Aurora* that journalists should lead public opinion: “We do not intend to *follow* in the wake of public opinion, but to *lead* it—to purify it—to renovate it with new vigor” (*The Journalism* 89). Moreover, on March 12, 1846, in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Whitman calls for the creation of a democratic cultural movement in the United States: “We could wish the spreading of a sort of democratical artistic atmosphere, among the inhabitants of our republic” (279). He calls for this democratic culture because he believes that Americans rely on the European cultural tradition.<sup>10</sup> This idea was circulating among the “Young America” group, which included Hawthorne, but Whitman also heard this idea from Emerson. By 1855 Whitman had heard Ralph Waldo Emerson give a speech on this topic, and it is likely, although he liked to disclaim it, that he had read Emerson’s writings.<sup>11</sup> Emerson spoke of the need for an American poet. He imagines the poet as one who can speak for all, as a namer of the new country and as a liberator of the American consciousness. Whitman wrote about composing an American book in the “Sun-Down Papers,” published in the *Long-Island Democrat*: “I would compose a wonderful and ponderous book. Therein should be treated on, the nature and peculiarities of men, the diversity of their characters, the means of improving the state, and the proper mode of governing nations” (*The Journalism* 22). The idea of writing a book about diversity and the state existed many years before *Leaves of Grass*, but it is in the book that he attempts to actualize that idea. Moreover, this quotation from late in his journalistic career shows that Whitman was becoming disenchanted with activism as a way to change Americans;

his next major attempt to create a democratic culture would be through literature, and to do that he created the lyric-epic.

## II. *Leaves of Grass*

Little actual history for Whitman exists between 1848 and 1855—he did much reading during these years, but it is clear that his silence in active politics signaled a shift in his beliefs, and his publication in 1855 of *Leaves of Grass* embodies that shift. The political intent of *Leaves of Grass* is pronounced in the first edition, and he discusses it in his preface. Even the structure of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* incorporates Whitman's democratic ideals, as Betsy Erkkila, among others, notes. First, the poems have no titles, and there is no table of contents. Only a line separates each poem from the next. Second, there is no mention of the author on the title page. In the beginning he places an image of himself as a rough young man. We only learn who the poet is from the small text copyright. Third, the book's cover is festooned with root-like impressions, and the text on the cover appears to be composed of roots. The lack of titles and separation between poems signals the vegetal quality of each poem, as if each poem is a leaf. This arrangement disrupts the concept of individual, separate poems. Each poem, though unique, is connected to the structural union of the whole. This concept is similar to Whitman's idea of an individual's role in a democracy. Leaves are symbols of people that Whitman hopes will sprout intellectually from his book. Also, leaves are an organic image that Whitman uses to symbolize growth. Whitman wants his book to grow with the people who read it. The symbol of leaves of grass implies a type of autonomy that would not apply if the leaves were those of a tree, for grass, like citizens in Whitman's ideal democracy, is not overly controlled by a central presence.

Next, the lack of an author's name denies the traditional notion of an author; the first mention of an author occurs some thirty pages into the first poem: "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos" (*Poetry* 50). The picture of the young man in the beginning actualizes this mythic image of Whitman. Essentially, Whitman attempts to create the image of the author; he does not present an author until well into the first poem, later known as *Song of Myself*, since he must create the poet through the poetry. This lack of an author's name until the middle of the poem stresses the individual's creation of his or her own fate in the United States. In other words, in Whitman's libertarian ideology, if an individual is left unimpeded by government, he or she can create a cosmos, a unique life. This anonymity also stresses the leveling power of democracy. In a democracy all people are equal. Thus, the picture of the young man from the beginning can be any person. The author is not a privileged person, but simply an individual American, even if he might be speaking for all, as Whitman suggests in the preface: "the others are as good as he [the poet], only he sees it and they do not" (10). Emerson echoes this sentiment in his essay "The Poet."

Besides the innovative structure, the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* contains a preface which explains its intent. Whitman states that the spirit of the poet "responds to his country's spirit" (7) and that the "American poet is to be transcendent and new" (8). By claiming that the poet must be new, he suggests that poetry in America must be new. This idea is a central reason for writing the American lyric-epic; America must have a founding work, an epic, that has a central focus on the individual or the lyric. Also in his preface he defines many aspects of the American poet:

The American bards shall be marked for generosity and affection and for encouraging competitors . . . They shall be kosmos . . . without monopoly or

secrecy . . . glad to pass any thing to any one . . . hungry for equals night and day. They shall not be careful of riches and privilege . . . they shall be riches and privilege . . . . The American bard shall delineate no class of persons not one or two out of the strata of interest nor love most nor truth most nor the soul nor the body most . . . . and not be for the eastern states more than the western or the northern states more than the southern. (15)

12

In this passage he stresses several beliefs that stem from his democratic ideals. First, American poets encourage competitors and are open with their ideas. Whitman's idea is similar to free trade, but the push against secrecy and towards openness stresses a desire to turn from what he viewed as the political corruption of his period. The stress on not delineating class or region emphasizes Whitman's desire for equality on all levels and for a complete union without partisan bickering. In other words, Whitman attempts to accomplish in his poetry what has not been possible in the realm of active politics. Edward Wheat calls this aspect of Whitman's work therapeutic (437). Wheat argues that Whitman intended to write an American epic that would heal the political problems of his times (442). Betsy Erkkila supports a similar reading by stating that *Leaves of Grass* was meant to regenerate old ideas of democracy (67). She believes that Whitman uses the founding fathers to oppose contemporary politicians. Like Wheat she also suggests that *Leaves of Grass* is intended to change the corrupt politics of the 1850s. David Reynolds offers a slightly different view by stating that Whitman's stress on union and fraternity in *Leaves of Grass* is a reaction to the fractured politics of his period ("Politics" 67). For Whitman, the American poet must sing "the great song of the republic" (*Poetry* 8) and must be "the voice and exposition of liberty" (17). The poet is a responsible guardian of the progress of liberty. The American poet exposes anyone who impedes the way of liberty and promotes anyone moving towards liberty, as he

states, “The attitude of the great poets is to cheer slaves and horrify despots” (17). This view is also central in *Canto general* to Neruda’s view of the poet’s purpose and influenced Neruda.

While Wheat is correct in stating that Whitman wants a therapeutic epic, Whitman did not expect automatic change in the politicians upon their reading his work.<sup>13</sup> He intended *Leaves of Grass* to transform politics conceptually in the minds of American citizens. In *Achieving Our Country*, Richard Rorty states that Whitman believes that “stories about what a nation has been and should try to be are not attempts at accurate representation, but rather attempts to forge a moral identity” (13). Whitman attempts to forge a new political consciousness in Americans, and that consciousness involves all aspects of life from morals to politics to religion. Reflecting Whitman’s conception of literature, his argument maintains that literature creates meaning. Literature is an instrument that can be used rhetorically in the creation of certain political ideologies. There is nothing new in this argument—W.R. Johnson suggests the same of Pindar’s odes, except that he thinks that Pindar uses his odes to support the prevailing political regimes (67). In a similar vein, Bill Hardwig argues that traditional epic poetry always bolsters specific political ideologies; moreover, he believes that epics usually support conservative ideologies through a process of masking their tyrannical actions (167).<sup>14</sup> Whitman does not desire to support a conservative regime; rather, he attempts to change politics through changing the people. Thus, he believes that our fundamental ideas are not stable concepts. They are taught to us through many mediums—literature is one of those mediums. Creating an authentic American literary culture is a way of fostering democratic politics. As

Larzer Ziff states, America signified for Whitman “a new way of perceiving reality” (xi). America is not the land; rather, it is a certain people with a specific way of perceiving. By creating cultural images for the American populace and for other populaces that look to America, Whitman can fashion an American culture in a democratic mold. This shaping function is the intent behind *Leaves of Grass*.

This function of the work is experimental. While Emerson calls for a specifically American poet, Whitman creates the American poet through rhetorical and stylistic means; moreover, Whitman’s stylistic techniques are largely innovations. For this reason many critics, including Henry James, criticized Whitman’s work for a lack of technique, yet later poets look to Whitman’s techniques as paradigms; as Ezra Pound later wrote in “A Pact,” “It was you that broke the new wood” (6). The “new wood” is a new poetic tradition. In attempting to create an American expression, Whitman forms a new poetics; he writes “New World songs, and an epic of Democracy” (*Poetry* 1024). For Whitman, the epic signifies the genre of nation founding, yet the epic form that Whitman uses is remade. Like most epic writers, Whitman revised the tradition significantly for his use. Other epic writers who did a similar thing are Dante in the *Divine Comedy* or Milton in *Paradise Lost*. Dante invents terza rima for the *Divine Comedy*; Milton shifts to blank verse in *Paradise Lost*. In both cases this shift was conceptual and stylistic. Moreover, many claim that the most significant modern epic attempts have abandoned poetry entirely for prose, like, for example, Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. So, while the epic in itself is not a new form, the way in which Whitman uses the epic is new. Conceptually, the lyric perspective in *Leaves of Grass* is similar to the first person perspectives of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* or William Wordsworth’s *The*

*Prelude*, yet Whitman's use of the lyric in the lyric-epic creates a form much different from that achieved by these two writers.

Like the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the later editions have the same goal of being therapeutic. Whitman discusses *Leaves of Grass* as a "language experiment"; he attempts to form a specifically American poetry and thus to alter the American psyche. To perform his experiment he continually revised the structure of the later editions. The editions build on each other as Whitman searches for a suitable form. In the process of revision he creates the metaphor of an organic work in *Leaves of Grass*. This metaphor implies that his work has grown from American soil; the book is native in its creation. He denies ornamentation for this reason. Ornamentation, unless it is organic, is not native to American poetry and cannot be used. This idea would later inspire the Prairie Style architects who read his work. Whitman's organic metaphor takes on many manifestations. For example, his focus on leaves metamorphoses poems into leaves—leaves as in pages from a printed book—that have grown naturally and continue to grow. Several critics note Whitman's inability to finish *Leaves of Grass*, but this inability underscores the intent of the work. First, for *Leaves of Grass* to appear organic it must continue to grow. Second, the continual changes replicate the process of change in the country. No static condition exists in which the individual has an unchanging relation to the Union. Our condition is always fluid as is that of the country. The organic metaphor for *Leaves of Grass* continues through all the versions. In the later versions the poems receive titles, and many of the titles change over the years. The 1891-92 edition, the final edition, creates a clear narrative, starting with an introduction, moving to an expression of American identity, shifting to an exploration of the love of comrades,



working through an examination of the Civil War, turning to American religion, and then extending to parting farewells, yet even this edition has two annexes.

### III. Poems and Techniques

Besides the changing editions and the theory from the prefaces, Whitman attempts to create the American democratic psyche through poetry, certainly in the poems that specifically concern contemporary political content, but more importantly through the poems that attempt to create an American ideology. He uses numerous techniques to implement this creation, as can be seen by examining several of his poems. The first, and perhaps most significant, technique he uses to create a democratic worldview is his poetic persona. This technique can be examined in *Song of Myself* since it is in this poem that Whitman created the poetic “I” and introduced many main themes of *Leaves of Grass*.

In *Song of Myself* Whitman stresses the democratic principles that he believes are necessary for the nation: tolerance, few centralized laws, no hierarchies, the power of its literature to instruct and guide, and the importance of the individual. The most commented on of these ideas by critics is his use of first person reference. Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, but especially in *Song of Myself*, Whitman refers to himself as “I,” “me,” and “me myself.” The “I” shifts throughout *Song of Myself*. At times Whitman claims that the “I” contains so much that the “I” expands to the point of disappearance. The “I” takes on the role of other characters; it even assumes the role of a leaf of grass. Whitman claims that “I” is full of many things: people, ideas, actions. In his famous phrase near the end of *Song of Myself*, the poet boasts, “I am large, I contain multitudes” (52, 7-8). Whitman’s focus on the “I” stems partially from the importance of

the individual for democracy. The individual is the basic unit from which a democracy gains its power, which is the primary reason for the lyric elements in the American lyric-epic. In singing the individual “I,” Whitman sings not only himself, which is important for him, but also the American individual. Late in his own life Whitman describes *Leaves of Grass* as a book that documents the life of a man. In documenting one American individual, Whitman creates a paradigm for all individuals in the United States. In the first lines of *Song of Myself*, he states:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (1,1-3)

While the speaker documents himself, he presents the image of all. This idea introduces one of the central problems that Whitman tries to confront in his democratic theory: how the individual and the union work together. Whitman’s use of the shifting “I” portrays the conflict that arises in a political system that encourages a mass of free individuals who attempt a union. Concerning the mention of atoms, Eric Wilson notes that Whitman takes these from Lucretius (1). Wilson states that Whitman used atoms because they do not reflect universal principles but rather temporary patterns of life that gather for federation (2). Wilson uses this point to argue that Whitman is a writer who, like Deleuze and Guattari, believes that life is composed of shifting multiplicities like “an ever-moving rhizome” (2). While Wilson’s reading is intriguing, the shifting multiplicities can also be understood in political terms as the relation of the individual to the Union. The individual, for Whitman, negotiates constantly shifting borders to retain liberty and democracy.

The individual in the role of the poet also functions as the hero for *Song of Myself* and for *Leaves of Grass* as a whole. This feature is a departure from accepted epic practice. Traditionally epics have heroes who are central to the action, such as Odysseus or Aeneas, but they do not usually take on the role of the writer. Dante in the *Divine Comedy* or Wordsworth in *The Prelude* could be seen as a forebear for Whitman's poet as hero since both poets incorporate the "I" into the epic; however, Whitman pushes their innovations a step further by disrupting the single narrative of the epic and using lyric elements rather than an episodic epic pattern. After Whitman the poet-hero became a hallmark of the American epic. In establishing the hero as the poet who creates the epic, Whitman defines many of the aspects that typify the American, or at least the American as created through the text. He stresses the organic nature of the I: "My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air" (1, 5). The poet springs from natural elements like the American poem which should grow out of the American people; by inference the American individual should grow out of the native environment. Along with organic growth, Whitman stresses primary contact for Americans:

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look  
through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in  
books,  
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,  
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self. (1, 35-37)

This idea is not limited to Whitman. Emerson and Thoreau both expressed similar points; however, for Whitman the individual filtering process is possible only in a political system that does not hamper the individual; thus, his insistence on individual creation and on experiencing phenomena first-hand acts to bolster his libertarian version of the

democracy. Having the American individual as the hero also suggests, as James Miller concludes, that the average American is just as important as traditional epic heroes (25).

The “I” takes on other roles in *Song of Myself*, becoming different characters and inviting characters to become part of it. In section thirty-three Whitman confesses, “I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs” (130). In this same section the “I” takes on other roles, as if in an attempt to contain them all. The “I” takes on the role of the other in the process of giving the other a voice, so the “I” becomes representative of the American individual in all of its diversity, but also it acts as a witness to American events.

Whitman’s individual focus does not signify that he claims originality for the individual; Whitman denies any claims of originality. Self-creation for Whitman is not an original act, for he views any creation as an act of fusing, rehabilitating, and taking what exists and modifying it. He states, “What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me” (14,15). Whitman claims that the American individual should be free and lawless, that the individual should not be hampered by constrictive laws. For while each part of the Union is unique, it is still part of the union and creates itself in that environment. This idea resembles Whitman’s *raison d’être* for the creation of his text. While the American lyric-epic is new, it is a reassembling of parts of language and of literary devices to serve a present purpose. Neruda follows Whitman’s lead in the reassembling process.

Along with the creation of the individual in *Song of Myself*, Whitman imprints his primary democratic principles on the reader. Diversity is one of the main principles

under discussion in *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman portrays the American individual as ultimately tolerant of all. To stress this he includes images of many professions and many ethnic groups in *Song of Myself*. For example, he tells the story of harboring a runaway slave:

The runaway slave came to my house and stopt outside,  
I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile,  
Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsy and  
    weak,  
And went where he sat on a log and led him in and assured him,  
And brought water and fill'd a tub for his sweated body and bruise'd  
    feet,  
And gave him a room that enter'd from my own, and gave him some  
    coarse clean clothes. (10, 10-16)

Whitman welcomes the slave as any other human; he takes him in and treats him like an equal. Later in the poem he startles his reader with, "I say that it is as great to be a woman as to be a man" (21, 5). His portrayal of women and different classes is his attempt to dismiss the hierarchies that are hampering the state of democracy by portraying the American individual as ultimately tolerant.<sup>15</sup>

Whitman often stresses diversity through his use of epic catalogues. As Betsy Erkkila argues, Whitman includes epic catalogue because the repetitive structure can portray the elements considered as equal (89). Throughout *Leaves of Grass* Whitman utilizes the catalogue to emphasize the equality of Americans. For example, in section fifteen of *Song of Myself* the speaker mentions people in various scenes and has little commentary:

The machinist rolls up his sleeves, the policeman travels his beat, the  
    gatekeeper marks who pass,  
The young fellow drive the express-wagon, (I love him, though I do  
    not know him;)  
The half-breed straps on his light boots to compete in the race. (15, 17-19)

This catalogue continues for another fifty-two lines; the entire list is like a review of the Greek armies in the *Iliad*, where there is little commentary. As in the *Iliad*, the catalogues provide the information on a collection, but the collection here is the contents of American democracy. True to his working-class background, Whitman includes all people in his description. Moreover, besides being an epic technique, the catalogue functions in the poem, like many of his other figures of repetition, such as anaphora, epizeuxis, alliteration, hypozeuxis, and epanalepsis, to create a biblical tone. As Joan Hallisey argues, Whitman takes up the role of the bard as much as he takes on the role of the prophet. Hallisey states that the two roles are connected in Whitman's poetic practice (8).<sup>16</sup> Coincidentally, he also uses the catalogue in *Song of Myself* to project images of American landscapes, as if he needs to include the land with the people in his creation of a bible of all things American. Intertwined with the catalogues, Whitman presents tales followed by lyrical sections. This mixture of forms replicates in literary techniques the idea of diversity that Whitman proliferates in content.

Other components in *Song of Myself* stress its democratic nature. Whitman focuses on the common nature of elements in America to point to the importance of all individuals. In other words, the common is the heart of a democracy because it derives its power from all people; Whitman attempts to rid his poem of class hierarchies to stress that all Americans are common. Moreover, as Erkkila and others note, *Song of Myself* is separated into fifty-two sections as if to evoke the weeks of the year (117). This time reference acts to provide an encyclopedic inclusion of all things American in a year, but also it lays out its information in a common measurement of time.

By focusing on the common, Whitman expresses that he is a poet of the people. When he first mentions his name in *Song of Myself*, he presents himself as a rough but democratic bard:

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,  
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking, and breeding,  
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from  
them.

.....  
I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,  
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their  
counterpart of on the same terms. (24, 1-11)

The image that he creates of himself is that of a native who enjoys bodily activities—not someone who dwells on the past, nor someone who holds him/herself apart from all.<sup>17</sup> Through his poetry he transmogrifies into a poet of democracy. In this passage, as in all of *Song of Myself*, Whitman creates a sense of the reader listening directly to the poet. This bardic rhetoric of orality suggests the prophetic nature of the American bard while at the same time attempting to place the reader and speaker on the same plane. With the image of a native who passes along democracy, Whitman mentions nature's politics. Whitman employs the idea of nature's politics to support his ideas of democracy. For him nature is democratic in that all things are accepted in nature. In another poem, "To a President," he mentions that the "politics of nature" is "amplitude, rectitude, impartiality" (2). By focusing on nature's politics, the American landscape, and the American individual, Whitman presents his image of democracy.

He demonstrates in *Song of Myself* how to achieve this image through a stress on procreation. For example, in section three Whitman uses one of his common techniques, diacope, to mention procreation: "Urge and urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world" (3, 7-8). Procreation and the creation of the American

public are thus connected in the poem. Many times in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman refers to his American poem as a “song of procreation”; the song will help fashion democratic persons, or as Whitman often states, it will produce athletic comrades. In “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” he expresses this sentiment with, “Produce great Persons, the rest follows” (3, 7). Whitman perceives *Song of Myself* as an aid in creating a democratic culture, as a literary piece that will grow in the reader. This growth is one of the many reasons Whitman uses the term leaves of grass. The grass grows like the reader or like the country. Ultimately, he hopes that individual Americans will be able to add their own lyrics to the Union.

While *Song of Myself* introduces many of Whitman’s themes and techniques, it does not comment on the purpose of *Leaves of Grass* as much as it shows that purpose. In some poems Whitman explains that purpose. For example, in “By Blue Ontario’s Shore” he explores the need for a poem that produces democratic individuals and defines what such a poem requires of the poet.

In this poem the speaker is approached by a “phantom” who asks him to chant an American Song:<sup>18</sup>

*Chant me the poem, it said, that comes from the soul of America,  
chant me the carol of victory,  
And strike up the marches of Libertad, marches more powerful yet  
And sing me before you go the throes of Democracy. (1, 4-6)*

In requesting a poem that is native to America, the phantom hopes it will be a victory carol because the United States has gained freedom and is a working democracy. Moreover, the phantom, which is a portrayal of the muse, asks the poet to “*strike up*” the progress of liberty. The poet’s song will play a role in affecting the fate of liberty in the United States; yet, liberty is not an easy goal and will face, as the speaker says a few



lines later, “death and infidelity at every step” (1,8), and for this the poet must sing “*the throes of Democracy*” because they are necessary for growth.<sup>19</sup> The song that emerges as “By Blue Ontario’s Shore” is a condensed version of *Leaves of Grass*. In this poem the speaker produces an American song and shows what such a song requires.

In the beginning of section two of the poem, the speaker discusses a nation emerging along with the individual poet:

A Nation announcing itself,  
I myself make the only growth by which I can be appreciated,  
I reject none, accept all, then reproduce all in my own forms. (2, 1-3)

The poet blends with the nation being announced. Like the nation that he wants to bring forth in writing, he states that he is tolerant and accepting; moreover, he confesses that he needs to create the song through which he can be appreciated. He uses his own forms to sing the song because only his own forms are available to sing the new nation. Later in the poem, the speaker states, “America brings builders, and brings its own styles” (5, 2). More than just reproducing forms, the poet of the American song must incite people to action. As in all of Whitman’s work, poetry is not disconnected from praxis. Here he suggests that the poem helps to “Produce great Persons,” and even more, that the poet is “he who tauntingly compels men, women, nations, / Crying, Leap from your seats and contend for your lives!” (4, 3-4). The poet’s words thrust one into action that exists outside of textuality. In section six he expands upon this theme by claiming that the American poet must act in “Incarnating this land” (6). He states that the poet must make “its cities, beginnings, events, diversities, wars, vocal in him” (6,9). The poet incarnates the nation through vocalizing its events. Concerning this idea, Richard Rorty states that it is Whitman’s belief that “Nations rely

on artists and intellectuals to create images of, and to tell stories about, the national past” (4). In vocalizing, in creating images, the poet incarnates a vision of the nation for the citizens, or at least this idea is what Whitman intended with his lyric-epic.

In section nine of “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” the speaker again mentions the phantom and its call to affect the country:

I heard the voice arising demanding bards,  
By them all native and grand, by them alone can these States be  
fused into the compact organism of a nation.  
.....  
Of all races and eras these States with veins full of poetical stuff most  
need poets, and are to have the greatest, and use them the  
greatest,  
Their presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their  
poets shall. (2-7)

The United States can be fused by American poets alone. The poetic material already exists; it needs organizing into an overall democratic culture. Poets, Whitman thinks, are in charge of mediating this democratic culture in ways that a president is not. He believes that the States need and will use poets more than in the past because he envisions poetry as central to the democratic process.

A few lines later, the speaker declares the prime component of the American poet’s song:

For the great Idea, the idea of perfect and free individuals,  
For that, the bard walks in advance, leader of leaders,  
The attitude of him cheers up slaves and horrifies foreign despots.  
.....  
For the great Idea,  
That, O my brethren, is the mission of poets. (10-11, 18-2)

In many poems in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman refers to the “Idea” as liberty, which, as several critics note, he often uses to refer to democracy. The mission of the American poet is to sing about liberty and, through singing, to foster liberty in the society. Behind

this idea is the individual, as he reveals in section fifteen, “The American compact is altogether with the individual” (8).

While most of the poems in *Leaves of Grass*, like “By Blue Ontario’s Shore” and *Song of Myself*, attempt to produce a democratic culture, some of the poems specifically criticize contemporary events that Whitman believes are harmful to democracy.<sup>20</sup> One such poem is “A Boston Ballad,” which is included in the *By the Roadside* section of *Leaves of Grass*. The section receives its title from its poems concerning contemporary reflections. In other words, in this section Whitman’s intent is similar to that expressed by Stendhal’s concept of the mirror, which is a reflector of contemporary society. The section contains two of the most contemporary political poems in the text, one is “A Boston Ballad,” which is a poem against the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The specific instance that sparked the poem was the return of the escaped slave Anthony Burns in 1854 to his master in Virginia. After Burns’ court case was ruled on, many anti-slavery activists protested the decision. One such rally occurred in Framingham on July 4, at which Henry David Thoreau presented the lecture “Slavery in Massachusetts.” According to David Reynolds the seizure of Burns left Whitman filled with disdain for the American treatment of slaves (“Politics” 78). His disgust prompted “A Boston Ballad” as a sarcastic protest of the event. Through the lyric, Whitman can present himself as having attended at the event.

Burns is not mentioned specifically in the poem, yet the scene of the poem contains federal guards leading Burns through the streets as if to turn him back over to his owner. The poem’s speaker gets up early to “see the show” (5) so that he can hear the patriotic songs being played. The scene is that of a parade celebrating the country,

and the speaker sarcastically speaks in praise of it. The guards who lead the prisoner are followed by “phantoms” of the American Revolutionary War. The guards are portrayed as direct descendants of the revolutionary figures, and this point is central to Whitman’s critique. These descendants of freedom fighters no longer fight for liberty; rather, they escort a prisoner from liberty into slavery. In their position as escorts, they betray a fundamental tenet of democracy. Mockingly, the speaker talks to the revolutionary phantoms:

What troubles you, Yankee phantoms? What is all this  
chattering of bare gums?  
Does the ague convulse your limbs? Do you mistake your  
crutches for firelocks, and level them? (16-17)

The Yankees are phantoms because they have been dead for years, but also because they act to haunt the present guards with the memory of their deeds. Their position as phantoms also stresses the death of American ideals through the action of returning Burns to slavery. A few lines later when the phantoms are near leaving, the speaker asks, “Is this hour with the living too dead for you?” (24). The grandsons of the phantoms, as Whitman calls the guard, are metaphorically dead. The American ideals that the grandfathers fought for have atrophied in the grandchildren. Whitman has the phantoms recognize this fact. First, they level their crutches like “firelocks”; the phantoms raise the only weapons they have as if they are facing their enemy in their grandchildren. Second, the phantoms are wounded: “Some appear wooden-legged and some appear bandaged / and bloodless” (10). The phantoms are hurt partially because they represent the democratic ideals that have gone through years of trial in practice, but also partially because what they stand for has been betrayed and beaten up by their descendants. Lastly, the phantoms leave as if they are retreating from an

indefatigable enemy. The speaker asks, "Are you retreating?" (23). The theme of the descendants turned enemy appears again as the speaker tells the phantoms, "I do not think you belong here anyhow" (26). Those who fought for freedom are no longer at home in the country of their grandchildren. The grandchildren, the guards, are now protecting not liberty but confinement.

The speaker furthers this transformation of the descendants by sarcastically suggesting that he will tell the mayor to send for King George's bones, for they are appropriate to fuel the current government. Through protecting slavery the guards are protecting the system that their grandfathers fought against; thus, as the speaker suggests, they might as well set up the bones of George as their ruler. To further draw the connection with the betrayal of American ideals of the guards, the speaker repeats the parade scene with many of the same words yet with George's bones at the center now. The speaker tells the bones, "You have got your revenge old buster!" (39). George has won the final battle through the reversal of the American government. Whitman stresses this fact by not mentioning Burns at all. Burns is a typical representation of the activities of the government, so while his treatment is the specific event of the poem, the problems of the government are widespread.

In the last lines of "A Boston Ballad," the speaker again mentions Jonathan, whom he had mentioned in the beginning as if he were speaking to Jonathan. The speaker states, "Stick your hands in your pockets Jonathan . . . you are a / made man from this day, / You are mighty cute . . . and here is one of your bargains" (40-41). Jonathan is cute because he has sacrificed the wild look of the "old maniacs," the phantoms, for a trouble-free life. For Whitman to be a democrat means to fight for

democratic ideals always. The speaker tells Jonathan to stick his hands in his pocket because he has no fight left. He is a “made man,” which for Whitman implies that he has not made himself, but rather that he is a product of the betrayal of American ideals. As an aside, it is worth mentioning that this poem was one of the twelve included in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. More forcefully than the other twelve, this poem displays Whitman’s disdain of contemporary politics and his need to create a democratic cultural movement through the lyric-epic.

This poem and Whitman’s other poems of disdain display some typical epic themes. First, the use of the past to criticize the present is a way of subsuming a misdirected decision of the present within the historical force of the epic. In other words, epic writers explore a national identity/government as it is formed; thus, any action the writer thinks is incorrect can be critiqued as working against the national/historical tide. Second, epic writers often use past figures as ideals by which to criticize or judge the present. Third, and connected, cultural tendencies or actions in the present that the writer thinks are misguided can give rise to the need for epic, a holistic work, to be written. Similar themes can be seen in many epic writers. Homer, for example, often compares present warriors to those of the past. The same occurs in *Beowulf*. Dante uses past figures to critique those in the present—this critique can be seen frequently in his portrayal of contemporary religious figures. “A Boston Ballad” is just one poem in which we can see the disappointment that pushed Whitman to write *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman’s dual sense of disappointment and optimism while writing *Leaves of Grass* is central to many epic works. Considering that epics are works that define national identity often at times of foundation or crisis, such a dual sense is

fundamental to the epic. Epics by writers like Homer, Dante, and Milton contain this dual sense. Pablo Neruda's *Canto general* also balances optimism with disappointment.

#### IV. Lyric in Epic Structure

Whitman's ideas of democracy structure the entire text and aided him in creating what James Miller calls a "free-verse lyric epic" (9). Miller's classification draws attention to several of the main differences between Whitman's text and those of traditional epics. First, *Leaves of Grass* is a whole; it has a narrative that is clear if read straight through. In his discussions late in life with Traubel, Whitman, even while he made selections of the text, stressed that the work was an entirety, that to understand the individual pieces was to see them in relation to the whole. This structure mimics the framework of the democratic system, and according to Edward Wheat is a replica of the problem of the self versus the Union ("Language Experiment" 438). Essentially, Whitman provides a work with myriad individual lyrics that create a federation. Throughout the years, *Leaves of Grass* grew in various ways, but it always retains the democratic structure. This structure differs highly from traditional epics which often contain episodic narratives; Whitman's divergence here is his way of creating a specifically American poem and stressing the individual. Second, the free verse that Whitman uses is part of his language experiment. Whitman was interested in slang, in Native American names, and in southern dialect. Since it is primarily through language that Whitman envisioned a new democratic cultural ideology, there must be new language and language practices to match America's new politics. The use of free verse is Whitman's attempt to create a new language practice for American literature.

By eschewing traditional meter, Whitman intended to found a specifically American poetics. Free verse or, as it is often called, organic form fits Whitman's political project because the form grows organically, or it is supposed to, for each poem. Each poem is thus separate in form from every other poem. Thus, free verse stresses the lyric-epic structure of the poem. Each lyric is an organic unit in its own right, but each functions to express the unity of the epic. Not only do Whitman's political goals function as central to the content of *Leaves of Grass*, but they also affect the structure of the text as a whole.

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Recently, the issue has been explored by Jerome Loving, David Reynolds, and Betsy Erkkila.

<sup>2</sup> The terms liberal and conservative have changed significantly since Whitman's period. For example, during the Civil War the Republican party with Lincoln at its head was considered liberal. Our sense of liberal in terms of one who wants to radically change the contemporary situation existed during this period. It is this definition of liberal that best applies to Whitman the poet; however, I do not want to stress the terms conservative or liberal more than necessary, for either term collapses under close scrutiny.

<sup>3</sup> Whitman had read Sismondi—he quotes him in 1856 in “The Eighteenth Presidency.”

<sup>4</sup> This concept of the importance of the common human is perhaps the most important aspect of Whitman's politics for Neruda.

<sup>5</sup> At twelve Whitman became a printer's assistant. Throughout his youth he changed jobs quickly, working as a printer, a newspaper editor, a journalist, and a teacher. These years of work strengthened his belief in the working-class.

<sup>6</sup> Orestes Brownson defined a locofoco: “A Loco-foco is a Jeffersonian democrat, passed through one phase of the revolution, now passed on to another, and attempts the realization of social equality, so that the actual conditions of men in society shall be in harmony with acknowledged rights as citizens” (Schelsinger 77). A locofoco was a radical democrat during the period in the late 1840s when the Democratic party split over slavery issues. The term was a Whig creation.



<sup>7</sup> The Fiscal Bank Bill was an attempt to reintroduce a national bank like that which had been disbanded by Andrew Jackson. Whitman believed in a hard currency that was supported by regional banks. He viewed a national bank as a monopoly; thus, it was dangerous to the people's freedom.

<sup>8</sup> Much political turbulence occurred in the years after the 1837 economic depression, and Whitman was involved actively in the debates for improving working-class conditions.

<sup>9</sup> Whitman's disillusionment with contemporary politics can be seen in "A Hand-Mirror":

Hold it up sternly—see this it sends back, (who is it? is it you?)  
Outside fair costume, within ashes and filth,  
No more a flashing eye, no more a sonorous voice or springy step,  
Now some slave's eye, voice, hands, step,  
A drunkard's breath, unwholesome eater's face, venerealee's flesh,  
.....  
No brain, no heart left, no magnetism of sex;  
Such from one look in this looking-glass ere you go hence,  
Such a result so soon—and from such a beginning! (1-5, 10-12)

<sup>10</sup> He mentions this problem in several editorials. See July 11, 1846 in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* for a discussion of being dependent on European literature (*The Journalism* 463).

<sup>11</sup> Many reasons exist for Whitman's denial of the influence of Emerson; the most significant relates to his desire to create the mythic image of "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos" (*Song of Myself* 50). In creating the image of the individual American, he downplays any influences.

<sup>12</sup> Kosmos is a word that Whitman uses many times in *Leaves of Grass*. He uses it either to refer to a person or to the world. It is connected in either sense, for Whitman believes that the world/nature accepts diversity in its unity. A person who is a kosmos does the same. That person not only accepts diversity into his or her identity, but also understands the necessity of diversity and how the world/nature accepts diversity. In other words, that person accepts diversity into his or her character but still manages to retain an unified identity.

<sup>13</sup> Whitman did expect his book to sell well at first; however, years of slow sales convinced him that the effect of *Leaves of Grass* would occur in the future.

<sup>14</sup> Hardwig argues that epic poets cover over the violent motives of conservative regimes through presenting actions as universal and destined for the nation (167). While this argument works with some ancient epics, the argument is much less tenable with more recent epics.

<sup>15</sup> One of Whitman's critiques of the Democratic party, his own party for many years, was that following Jackson the party did not support women's rights. His inclusion of women as equal, an inclusion that has received much critical inquiry lately by feminist critics, is a political act in both a present and a future sense. The inclusion of blacks is similar in that the contemporary situation is commented on through the inclusion, which is in ways surprising considering that this section was originally written well before the Civil War in the years just after Whitman's support of the Free Soil party. Nevertheless, the inclusion of women, minorities, and working-class citizens portrays diversity as a prime element of Whitman's vision of democracy.

<sup>16</sup> While Hallisey provides an interesting argument concerning Whitman's use of the Bible, her argument essentially fails due to her reliance on Whitman's belief in Christianity. Whitman does use Biblical language; however, for most of his life he took a negative view of the church. Besides, part of his political goal in *Leaves of Grass* is to encourage a new democratic religion for the United States.

<sup>17</sup> The mention of eating and drinking is significant for this study primarily in the connection it has for Neruda. Neruda repeats pan ("bread") sixty-six times in *Canto general*, and his mentions are always in connection with working-class people. Whitman specifies his diet on numerous occasions in *Leaves of Grass*, as if to suggest that his diet is somehow the common American's diet. In both works food is used as an image of connection to the people.

<sup>18</sup> Neruda also mentions a phantom that lies behind his poetry. It is conceivable that he picked up the image from Whitman; however, the phantom in Neruda's work is more likely the spectre that Marx and Engels mention in the *Communist Manifesto* is haunting Europe. In other words, the spectre is communism.

<sup>19</sup> In his poems about the Civil War, Whitman mentions several times that hardships are necessary for the Union and that they will help produce a better country.

<sup>20</sup> Neruda's poems tend to concern more specific contemporary events than Whitman's, with the exception of the Civil War pieces; however, since Neruda is trying to convince Latin Americans to institute communist governments, his portrayal of the corrupt nature of contemporary Latin American governments is appropriate.

### Chapter 3: Camaraderie and the Union: Whitman's Manly Love

It will be a great blessing to our country if we can once more restore harmony and social love among its citizens.

Thomas Jefferson (Letter to E. Gerry, 1801)

In *Leaves of Grass* Walt Whitman uses the term comrade fifty-eight times, the variant camerado eight times, and variants such as friend or companion numerous times. He mentions on many occasions both in his poetry and in his prose that camaraderie is central to his vision of American democracy. Yet, among critics the connection of democracy and camaraderie is one of the least discussed of the possible meanings of the term comrade. David Kuebrich, for example, mentions the political significance of camaraderie for Whitman; however, he points out that this is the least important connotation for Whitman (143). Kuebrich believes that Whitman intended camaraderie as a spiritual connection between the poet and the reader or between the poet or the reader and God. By seeing the ideal comrade now, the poet can imagine his or her relation to the "perfect Comrade" who is divine. Among recent criticism, Kuebrich is in the minority with such an interpretation. By far the most common recent discussions have centered on Whitman's connection of camaraderie with homosexuality. Many critics, such as Betsy Erkkilla, argue that Whitman includes comrades to focus on the sexual politics of his period.<sup>1</sup> Some state that even though Whitman several times denied the homosexual overtones to *Leaves of Grass*, he essentially wrote what he desired, even if subconsciously, especially in the *Calamus* section.<sup>2</sup> Whitman has several meanings in mind when using the term comrade, and his expressions of "manly love" and "American love" do have homosexual overtones. The term also connects to his creation of democratic religion, as do most of his terms.

However, in exploring how Whitman's democratic ideals structure his American lyric-epic, this chapter discusses the specific relation of camaraderie to democracy as imagined by Whitman. This exploration can be facilitated by first examining camaraderie and love, then seeing camaraderie as an equalizer for the Union, and lastly considering Whitman's attempt to foster camaraderie in the reader.

### I. Camaraderie and Love

Love, a prevalent term in *Leaves of Grass*, is used four hundred times. Often, the term love stands in close relation with comrade or camerado.<sup>3</sup> Love can have many definitions, but in Whitman's work love is tied to sexual desire, as many early critics of Whitman asserted while they suggested that he change this focus. Love, however, has other connotations in *Leaves of Grass*—one of those is the “robust American love” that Whitman stresses. While this form of “manly love” can imply homosexual relations, in many instances in the text, the term is used to signify an intimate bond between individuals. Camerado, as Marian Stein explains, implies a more personal, intimate connection between two people in Whitman's work (123). We see the significance of Whitman's idea of love borne out in its connection to comrade or camerado. This connection is apparent in *Calamus*, the section that Whitman associates with bodily desire, which contains sixteen instances of the term, while *Drum-Taps*, the section connected with the Civil War, contains fourteen instances. In *Drum-Taps* the occurrences of comrade are not primarily sexual. Whitman mentions comrades in war. In many cases the term comrade is often accompanied by the term lover, as if to suggest a specific difference between the two. These uses of the term do not deny validity to the numerous critical arguments about Whitman's gender instability, but they

do point out that there is an equally important use of the term *love* in *Leaves of Grass* as a type of “manly love” that connects people in non-sexual ways. This fact is often overlooked by critics arguing Whitman’s sexual politics. When Whitman states in “For You O Democracy” that he “will plant camaraderie thick as trees” in America, he doesn’t mean that he will create a large homosexual culture in the United States; rather, his focus is on uniting the Union through a different style of love, a style that ties citizens together through camaraderie.<sup>4</sup>

In “For You O Democracy,” he expresses his desire for a unified United States through “the love of comrades”:

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,  
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,  
I will make divine magnetic lands,  
                    With the love of comrades,  
                    With the life-long love of comrades.

I will plant camaraderie thick as trees along all the rivers of  
                    America, and along the shores of the great lakes, and all over  
                    the prairies,  
I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other’s  
                    necks,  
                    By the love of comrades,  
                    By the manly love of comrades.

For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you ma femme!  
For you, for you I am trilling these songs. (1-11)

The songs of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman hopes, will cause a change in the country by providing the necessary cohesion for the democratic government to rule. By stating that he will create a splendid race, he focuses on the political goal of the text, a goal which he believes is forwarded by fostering an intimate connection between individuals. As comrades, citizens will have a close connection with their fellow citizens. By nature, as he implies with the adjective “magnetic,” the citizens that he nurtures through his songs

will tend toward union—they will be drawn together. His image of planting the trees draws attention to this magnetism and the natural essence of “the love of comrades.” Camaraderie will make cities inseparable. Like the indissoluble continent, the cities will be connected through the fellow feelings of the citizens. Since they feel a bond of love among themselves, citizens will be tied together. Through this connection they will be able to work out any problems in the country. “For You O Democracy” was first included in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and allows one to see Whitman’s fervent hope for a unified continent just prior to the Civil War. During this period, Whitman’s desire for camaraderie is often off-balanced by the fear of the Union’s dissolution. This “manly love,” which in some cases may be sexual, is here portrayed as a necessary bond that will serve democracy, a bond that will be created by Whitman’s poetry.

In many poems, Whitman stresses this bond of camaraderie as natural. In “I Hear It Was Charged Against Me,” the speaker states:

I hear it charged against me that I sought to destroy institutions,  
But really I am neither for nor against institutions,  
(What indeed have I in common with them? or what with the  
destruction of them?)  
Only I will establish in Mannahatta and in every city of these  
States inland and seaboard,  
And in the fields and woods, and above every keel little or large that  
dents the water,  
Without edifices or rules or trustees or any argument,  
The institution of the dear love of comrades. (1-7)

Much as in “For You O Democracy,” Whitman presents himself as the founder of the institution of camaraderie among the States. Like the trees, camaraderie is natural in that it is not part of a systemic institution and needs no rules or arguments. In “Who Learns My Lesson Complete?,” he states, “The great laws take and effuse without

argument”(7). Like the “great laws” camaraderie does not need to convince because it is natural according to Whitman.<sup>5</sup> For him, democracy is natural and will be upheld by the cornerstone of camaraderie.<sup>6</sup> Since they have an intimate bond, citizens will desire to retain equal relations among themselves. Also, without a heavy framework of laws, people will be free to act as individuals. The first two lines of “I Hear It Was Charged Against Me” stress Whitman’s libertarian politics; he expresses his general concern for individuals to be left alone by the law.<sup>7</sup>

## II. Camaraderie, Equality, and the Reader

Whitman stresses the common nature of elements in *Leaves of Grass*, and his focus on the common is significant for democracy because the common element, the people, is in control of power. By emphasizing the common Whitman attempts to empower his readers. His stance against institutional hierarchy intends to shift the focus to the common person. In other words, by writing against what he perceives as traditional power structures, Whitman wishes to create a positive cultural climate for the average person in the country. Fostering camaraderie is a way of equalizing relations among individuals. If each person is a comrade or companion, then each person is equal under the protection of the law. Camaraderie works among individuals, but Whitman does not limit the spirit of camaraderie to individuals. As he states in “The Base of Metaphysics,” he sees it as underpinning all theories:

The dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend to  
friend,  
Of the well-married husband and wife, of children and parents,  
Of city for city and land for land. (13-15)

This passage can mean that Whitman sees love as a foundational principle of human life, or it could mean that the bond that he sees connecting the cities and the lands is

similar to the one he discusses as camaraderie.<sup>8</sup> This sense of love precludes action against the other. Cities that have “loving” bonds will not theoretically act out against one another. The bond fostered by camaraderie among individuals and collectives will stabilize the democracy. If a citizen sees all people as equals, then that individual will not want to hamper another equal’s abilities and will also stand up for another person’s rights as if for his or her own. This connection is symbolized in the loose narrative that ties the individual lyrics into an epic form.

For Whitman the poet is integral in creating this sense of camaraderie, as he shows in “A Promise to California”:

A promise to California,  
Or inland to the great pastoral Plains, and on to Puget sound and  
Oregon;  
Sojourning east a while longer, soon I travel towards you, to remain,  
to teach robust American love,  
For I know very well that I and robust love belong among you, in-  
land, and along the Western sea;  
For these States tend inland and towards the Western sea, and I will  
also. (1-5)

California, the endpoint for settlers during Whitman’s time, acts as a future boundary line for Whitman’s image of America. As the country grows, the citizens will progress towards California. In time, Whitman suggests that he will progress along the same route, teaching “American love” because it belongs among the people. The travel west is presented as a natural evolution as is the need for this robust love to bind people together. As mentioned already, the need for union in the country was especially important during that period. Whitman believed that democracy was still an experiment, and like the Federalists, Whitman suggests that factions will only endanger the experiment. The vestige of the Old World caste system filtered its way through factions



and parties, and Whitman's idea for combating this internal systemic challenge is to create camaraderie as a foundation. As the country grows into its newer territories, Whitman hopes to underpin that territorial growth with democratic cultural growth.

Many examples exist to show the cultural impact of camaraderie as an equalizer; one such example is found in his Civil War poem "Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice":

Be not dishearten'd, affection shall solve the problems of freedom yet,  
Those who love each other shall become invincible

.....  
One from Massachusetts shall be a Missourian's comrade,  
From Maine and from hot Carolina, and another an Oregonese, shall  
be friends triune

.....  
The dependence of Liberty shall be lovers,  
The continuance of Equality shall be comrades.

These shall tie you and band you stronger than hoops of iron,  
I, ecstatic, O partners! O lands! with the love of lovers tie you.

(Were you looking to be held together by lawyers?  
Or by an agreement on paper? or by arms?  
Nay, nor the world, nor any living thing, will so cohere.) (2-22)

Written in 1865, this poem mentions that the division, literally the Civil War, would find resolution in affection or camaraderie.<sup>9</sup> Through friendships formed by peoples in diverse parts of the country, i.e. Missouri, California, Maine, etc . . . , the fracture in the country can be mended. In Whitman's view neither economics nor law can bring people together since legislation will not work to join people together unless there is something that unifies the people outside of legislation. Economic deprivation, legislation, and military dominance cannot function to hold America together. This observation applies to the Civil War specifically and to the governance of the States generally. After the war, Whitman backed Lincoln's leniency for the South; the theoretical logic for this

support could be predicted by the poem's inclusion of all states in the bond of camaraderie at a period historically when the states were fractured. Through his inclusiveness Whitman attempts to foster camaraderie. Equality depends upon removing the remnants of hierarchy and connecting the citizenry personally/emotionally to each other. The last few lines of "Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice" display Whitman's libertarian commitments. By stating that legislation does not hold ultimate authority, Whitman retains the sentiments expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Whitman's insistence on camaraderie reinforces his fundamental belief that for a specific form of government to function well it must first be anticipated in intellectual or cultural beliefs.

Whitman portrays the equalizing and loving bond created by camaraderie in many of the poems from *Drum-Taps*, his poetry of the Civil War. In these poems he usually portrays all soldiers as comrades, no matter on what side they fought. The lyric quality of the poems stress the close connection between him and the soldiers. Even though several critics have discussed his close ties with men among the soldiers—it is easy enough to read Whitman's version of camaraderie in *Drum-Taps* sexually—, Whitman's expression of camaraderie has other dimensions that are non-sexual. For example, in "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim" the speaker walks among those left unattended in the morning and states:

Curious I halt and silent stand,  
Then with light fingers I from the face of the nearest the first just lift  
the blanket;  
Who are you elderly man so gaunt and grim, with well-gray'd hair,  
and flesh all sunken about the eyes?  
Who are you my dear comrade? (7-10)

Before knowing who this elder is, the speaker accepts the person as a comrade, as a friend.<sup>10</sup> No necessary sexual allusion is included in this recognition, but the speaker does insist on a shared quality between the soldier and himself. In another poem, “Ashes of Soldiers,” Whitman again discusses all soldiers as comrades and states that he sings his song “in the name of all dead soldiers” (22).<sup>11</sup> In this poem he also mentions that the war is over and that what remains after the battle is love, the intimate bond among people. He places his song in the position of witness, as something that will show what has happened and help people heal themselves. Neruda also picks up on this theme in *Canto general*.

Besides discussing camaraderie’s necessity in the Civil War era, Whitman attempts to instill the feeling of camaraderie in the reader. Betsy Erkkila argues that the hero of *Leaves of Grass* is “you” instead of “I” partially because Whitman’s attempt to create a politically activated reader (91). Reader address is frequent and important to Whitman’s political goals. A poem in which Whitman addresses the reader as a camerado is “Song of the Open Road.” This poem contains many of the other elements of camaraderie mentioned before. The open road is the democratic road, the public road accessible to all. The speaker states of the road, “Here the profound lesson of reception . . . None are but accepted” (2, 3). He also expresses his desire to reexamine past knowledge: “Now I re-examine philosophies and religions” (6, 15) and “From this hour I ordain myself loos’d of limits and imaginary lines / Going where I list, my own master total and absolute” (5, 1-2). He contends that the “lesson of reception” is also nature’s lesson. He claims that “I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes, / We convince by our presence” (10, 15-16). Whitman presents his lifestyle like

the “great laws” in that it does not need to persuade since it is. Finally, after fifteen sections of exhorting the reader to join him in his travels of the open road, the speaker states:

Camerado, I give you my hand!  
I give you my love more precious than money,  
I give you myself before preaching or law;  
Will you give me yourself? Will you come travel with me?  
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live? (15, 7-11)

As in “Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice,” Whitman explains that his gift is more important than any economic gift or any law or religion that governs a person. His gift is that of camaraderie. Whitman spends fifteen sections explaining the joys and the trials to be encountered on the open road of democracy and then at the end asks for the reader’s direct participation in this journey. The context of the poem implies that the reader’s acceptance is the acceptance of the democratic way of life. In the process of asking the reader for camaraderie, he presents himself as a friend but also as an ideal democratic individual. Just as the individual “I” of *Song of Myself* is an attempt to create a paradigm for the American “I,” the individual in “Song of the Open Road” does the same; this paradigm presents the American individual as one who shares camaraderie with all who so desire. Whitman presents the reader with the ideal American and asks the reader to become that American. The mention of camerado, which as stated earlier implies a closer connection than comrade, does contain sexual overtones, yet Whitman stresses procreation in *Leaves of Grass*; he uses procreation to explain a new American literary culture, and here in “Song of the Open Road,” as in many other poems, his sexual overtones point to the need for reader to engage in the creation of a new democratic culture.

As a last note on camaraderie, this use of “I” and “you” in “Song of the Open Road” is a prime example of the use of a lyric-epic instead of a more traditional epic. Of central significance to the lyric is its ability to create a lyric moment in which time is gathered to a point and seems to halt. This lyric moment allows Whitman to speak more directly to the reader from the position of an “I” than is possible in traditional epics; plus, it stresses the “you” of the poem that is necessary for the completion of the poem, i.e. the reader must act as a camerado in the position of a “you” or reject the invitation altogether. In other words, the lyric-epic attempts to pull the reader in on a more personal level than traditional epics do and to create a sense of camaraderie among individual Americans.

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The idea of sexual politics does not fit under the idea of politics argued in this work. Often, sexual politics as discussed by literary critics has little to do with the actual governance of the state. Whitman is concerned with the actual political role that women play in the United States as well as with the creation of gender roles in society.

<sup>2</sup> See Vivian Pollock's *The Erotic Whitman*.

<sup>3</sup> Neruda uses love many times in *Canto general* in this same connection.

<sup>4</sup> Leland Krauth argues that camaraderie as politics is tied into camaraderie as sexual desire because Whitman sees the love that underlies the love between two people as the love that connects to the love of the universe (151). While Whitman might have thought this, it is not easy to prove, as Krauth's scanty evidence shows.

<sup>5</sup> The line in “Shut Not Your Doors” “The words of my book nothing, the drift everything” (4) can be argued in a similar vein. In other words, Whitman does not need to have strenuous arguments due to fact that his book heralds some “great law.”

<sup>6</sup> It should be mentioned that his idealized version of comradeship and politics is something that he confronts through his poems of questioning identity. Latent in Whitman's theory of comradeship is the fact that those in love, both sexual and otherwise, will attempt to retain equal standing under the law. Although he never directly addresses this issue in a poem (and why would he if he intended to convince his audience?), this issue is brought to the forefront in poems in which he questions his

identity. *Leaves of Grass* intends to present the ideal American personality, so if that ideal personality cannot be counted on to understand him/herself as stable, how can that person be expected to retain any stability in comradeship? In other words, Whitman's theory is problematic due to the shifting nature of human beings.

<sup>7</sup> The first two lines of "I Hear It Was Charged Against Me" display a tendency in Whitman's work to present himself as an anti-system thinker.

<sup>8</sup> Whitman states in this poem that under Christ's teachings are love, especially love in the sense of companionship. In "To Him That was Crucified," Whitman again makes the same statement about Christ. He states that both he and Christ accept all and spread a feeling of love. This connection to Christ places Whitman the poet in the position of the prophet of a new religion by association. This role is mentioned often in *Leaves of Grass*, but in relation to comradeship, it stresses the religious nature of comrades. Treating all as comrades, as equals, implies accepting all, which is a fundamental moral principle of the new democratic religion that Whitman desires to follow. This concept also allows for each person to accept another person's religious views.

<sup>9</sup> Concerning the role of camaraderie in the war, much has been written. It suffices here to mention that Whitman's view of camaraderie in relation to democracy primarily developed through the Civil War years. Before the war, his idea of camaraderie was linked with a type of homoerotic manly love. During the war, he shifted his thinking to imagine camaraderie as the bond between soldiers. He also began during this period to view camaraderie as the bond that would act to heal the rifts of the war. Camaraderie would thus be used in service of the nation, but it would also help solve what Whitman thought was the central problem of democracy: the problem of the freedom of the individual versus the necessity of the Union. As the war dragged on, Whitman began to see camaraderie as the only healing agent for a unified country.

<sup>10</sup> Whitman mentions Christ again in this poem, as if to stress that Christ's theory is also companionship and to suggest that he is laying the foundation for a new religion. Biblical imagery reoccurs frequently in *Leaves of Grass* and even to a further extent in Neruda's *Canto general*.

<sup>11</sup> Through the act of witnessing, Whitman attempts to bridge the gap between normal life and life at war. This gap is something that he first noticed when he arrived at the front and that he mentions in his letters. People at home cannot know the experience of the front—the way that bodies are taken apart with arms and legs lying in piles, how people are left uncared for in busy wards, and how soldiers lose connection with their families and die alone. They can only know it conceptually without the emotions. So Whitman tries to span this gap through the act of witnessing. With the imaginative presentation, he hopes to allow the reader to understand the events.

Moreover, since Whitman's sense of being a witness comes primarily from his experience in the hospitals, Whitman attempts, as Wynn Thomas argues, to provide

witness to the soldiers who died alone (90). By writing about the solitary soldiers, he names himself and the readers as a funeral procession.

## Chapter 4: Whitman and History's Cyclical, Linear Stasis

What we have to do to-day is to receive them [past literatures] cheerfully, and to give them ensemble, and a modern American and democratic physiognomy.

Whitman (*Poetry* 1097)

The fruition of democracy, on aught like a grand scale, resides altogether in the future.

Whitman (981)

Whitman presents multiple versions of history in *Leaves of Grass*—versions which at times in Whitmanesque fashion appear to be contradictory. At certain moments Whitman seems to push aside the past for the future, while at times he states that the past, present, and future all are contained in the present. He mentions history as cyclical and history as linear, yet both of these appear to break down in contradiction, and what is left is the present in which the past and the future are both written. Moreover, Whitman's version of history is literary or mythological history. He conceives of history in three divisions: ancient, feudal, and modern. This view is simplistic, yet Whitman does not deviate heavily from it, and he hardly ever mentions specific historical events outside of his contemporary period. The history that he references in *Leaves of Grass* is primarily textual history. He mentions figures like Roland, Merlin, Odysseus, and he also alludes to ancient texts of Asia and India. While this chapter is about Whitman's version of history, it concerns primarily history as a product of texts; moreover, since the production of an American text is central to Whitman's project, so is the creation of history in *Leaves of Grass*. In this chapter I explore how Whitman uses various versions of history to emphasize further the democratic themes of *Leaves of Grass*. After first looking at his versions of history separately, I then examine how they



function together as one seemingly but not contradictory vision of history that lies at the heart of his creation of a lyric-epic.

First, many critics, like Agnieszka Salka, discuss progress as Whitman's complete picture of history, and in some sense, Whitman's view of history is indeed linear (36). Whitman portrays history as progressing towards democracy. He stresses this myth of progress repeatedly. For example, in "To Thee Old Cause," he states:

(I think all war through time was really fought, and ever will be  
really fought for thee [democracy])  
These chants for thee, the eternal march of thee. (6-7)

Again in "Song of the Broad-Axe," he states, "The main shapes arise! / Shapes of Democracy total, result of centuries" (12, 1-2). In "Song of the Universal," he calls America "the scheme's culmination" (4, 2). In "Passage to India," he states:

Along all history, down the slopes,  
As a rivulet running, sinking now, and now again to the surface rising,  
A ceaseless thought, a varied train  
.....  
Lands found and nations born, thou born America,  
For purpose vast, man's long probation fill'd,  
Thou rondure of the world at last accomplish'd. (4, 5-13)

Whitman presents the progression of history as natural. He sees the past as a progress towards democracy. Historically, this vision of progress has clear roots in Whitman's times. The idea of Manifest Destiny was popular in the United States in Whitman's youth; it was promoted extensively by the Jackson Administration. Inherent in this idea is the drive of the United States to fulfill the ideological goals set by the forefathers, but perhaps on a more practical level, the idea emphasizes the drive to inhabit the western states. President Polk adopted Manifest Destiny officially during 1845 by arguing that the United States should occupy the entire North American continent. Moreover, the

Jacksonians, whose influence on Whitman's family and Whitman was extensive, believed that history was progressing towards their ideals, ideals similar to Whitman's. This idea of historical progress was also fostered by a rapid increase in technological innovation; life appeared to speed up and improve in the nineteenth century. The railroads began to crisscross the country. The Erie Canal was completed in 1825. The mechanical reaper for grain was invented in 1831, as was the revolver in 1835. Anesthesia came into use in 1842, and just two years later the telegraph was invented. Ice began to be used for refrigeration on railcars, and the process of canning food was invented. These inventions, among many others, helped revolutionize industry in the United States, and fostered a sense of progress; moreover, Whitman picked up ideas of progress, as Kathryne Lindberg suggests, from the Hegelian thought that was circulating in American intellectual circles of the period (252).<sup>1</sup> Hegel sees history as a development of spirit—the spirit historically progresses for the better. The amount of Hegel's work Whitman actually read is disputable; however, that he was familiar with the ideas either second-hand or through Hegel's influence on nineteenth-century intellectuals is clear. Lindberg argues that what Whitman did read of Hegel he agreed with because he already believed it (247).

On a rhetorical level in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman uses this sense of historical progression to foster democracy in his readers, which is the purpose of his lyric-epic. He rewrites history in an attempt to portray democracy as the culmination of centuries, as the product of a divine plan. Through this rewriting process he keeps stressing that democracy is naturally progressing; thus, he attempts to stall any argument against democracy by stating that such an argument is against the natural order of the universe.

This argument can be understood in contrast to the arguments of Carlyle and Sismondi—writers who questioned the progress of democracy and with whom Whitman was familiar. For example, Carlyle argues that individual liberty splits the nation and tears down social responsibility. Instead of replacing the old order with something valuable, democracy strips the old order to replace it with capitalist values of loss and gain. For Carlyle, there can be no social order without a higher authority and its accompanying hierarchies. As mentioned earlier, Sismondi rejects the idea of the people's sovereignty. In *Leaves of Grass* the historical progression of democracy is connected to the divine. According to Whitman's progress myth, Americans—democratic individuals—are bound on “the seas of God . . . where no mariner has not yet dared to go” (“Passage” 9, 27). But, as we are told, the voyage has been prepared by centuries of progress, and the trip has been planned by the divine. Whitman makes God a final step in the argument, a final step that cannot be superseded.

In “Prayer of Columbus” Whitman reinforces this theme by having Columbus feel urged on by God:

O I am sure they really came from Thee,  
The urge, the ardor, the unconquerable will,  
The potent, felt, interior command, stronger than words,  
A messages from the Heavens whispering to me even in sleep,  
These sped me on. (26-30)

Whitman's Columbus felt God's message speeding him forward to discover the Americas. This idea presents a new biblical story for the United States, a new mythic rewriting of history as destined progress, with the Americas assuming the role of the promised land. Whitman's rhetorical argument is the following: arguing in the face of divinity is futile; thus, standing in the way of democracy in the long run will not halt its

progress because democracy is God's will. Whitman states on numerous occasions that even if democracy is set back in one period, it will keep progressing. Along with the need for a new cultural tradition, new democratic individuals, and a new democratic religion, Whitman presents this myth of progress to strengthen his reader's belief in democracy.

In furthering the sense of the historical progression of democracy, Whitman often ties democratic progress to the progress of technology and the westward movement towards the Pacific coast. This connection ties events with which readers are familiar to Whitman's schema of history. For example, he describes the western shore of the country in "Song of the Redwood-Tree":

I see in you, certain to come, the promise of thousands of years, till  
now deferr'd,  
Promis'd to be fulfill'd, our common kind, the race.

The new society at last, proportionate to Nature.

.....

Fresh come, to a new world indeed, yet long prepared,  
I see the genius of the modern, child of the real and ideal,  
Clearing the ground for broad humanity, the true America, heir of  
the past so grand,  
To build a grander future. (3, 3-11)

The new society, democratic America, is envisioned as "proportionate to Nature." It will embody "the politics of nature" in that it will accept all, be tolerant, be free, be changing, and be organic.<sup>2</sup> Here the redwood trees are cleared for land that democratic individuals can use. Whitman personifies the trees as content that free individuals will be cutting them down and that the new society built on the land will have a "grander future."

Whitman often stresses in his writings that the products of America will be better than the products of past societies. He especially applies this idea to literary products. Since past literature contains European hierarchies, it is harmful to democratic individuals. In *Democratic Vistas* Whitman states, "The great poems, Shakespeare included, are poisonous to the idea of the pride and dignity of the common people, the life blood of democracy. The models of our literature, as we get it from other lands, ultramarine, have had their births in courts, and basked and grown in castle sunshine: all smells of princes' favors" (343). In many poems, such as "As I Ponder'd in Silence," Whitman rejects all past literature; however, at other times Whitman claims that the present is built on the past.

Along with the progress of land, Whitman connects the progress of democracy to the progress of technology. In "Our Old Feuillage," the speaker states:

Males, females, immigrants, combinations, the copiousness, the  
individuality of the States, each for itself—the money-makers,  
Factories, machinery, the mechanical forces, the windlass, lever,  
pulley, all certainties,  
The certainty of space, increase, freedom, futurity. (64-66)

The progress of the future is tied to the progress of technology. Both are certainties moving forward. He makes a similar connection in "Years of the Modern:"

With the steamship, the electric telegraph, the newspaper, the wholesale  
engines of war,  
With these and the world-spreading factories he interlinks all geography,  
all lands;  
What whispers are these O lands, running ahead of you, passing  
under the sea. (18-20)

Technological advance is connected with progress, which underlines the spread of democracy over the world. The progress of technology, as the push west, is something that his readers can understand; thus, the connection is intended to strengthen their

faith in democratic ideals. Whitman links the metaphor of technology's progress with the metaphor of history's progress in order to claim the positive feelings of his readers for technology and democratic culture.

Along with technological advance and national expansion, Whitman rewrites several biblical stories in order to lend credence to the myth of democratic progression. One such story that he rewrites in the context of the United States is the story of Adam. This rewriting occurs primarily in the *Children of Adam* section of *Leaves of Grass*. Adam is written as the father of democratic individuals. Many reasons exist for Whitman's recasting of the biblical Adam. First, Adam does not have an inherited past, just as Whitman portrays American poets as having no poetic past and American individuals as having little historical past. Second, Adam is innocent. Third, he is a creator and a namer. He makes the names of his own reality. In Whitman's myth the songs are portrayed as Adam, as is the poet, and the children of Adam are the readers who become democratic individuals after reading the text. Whitman stresses this idea through the procreation theme that runs throughout *Leaves of Grass*. He states that he is "Singing the song of procreation, / Singing the need of superb children and therein superb grown people" ("From Pent-up Aching Rivers" 5-6). He says in "By Blue Ontario's Shore," "Produce great Persons, the rest follows" (3, 7). For this goal, he uses the myth of Adam to suggest a new beginning for Americans.<sup>3</sup> This mythic theme of Adamic rebirth is apparent in many poems, such as "Ages and Ages Returning at Intervals": "I, chanter of Adamic songs, / Through the new garden the West, the great cities calling" (4-5). The new creation in the West needs a new Adam to provide names, to provide language for use. In addition, as in the biblical story, Adam is also the first in

a new line; moreover, Whitman's Adam welcomes inclusion, tolerance, languages, and the body, which is tied to his procreative urges. Whitman rewrites Adam to stress a myth of progress—progress which appears divinely spurred. Ultimately, Whitman uses the Bible as he would any other historical text to foster belief in the democratic system he is espousing. In essence, he attempts to transfer biblical authority to *Leaves of Grass*.

Besides rearranging biblical stories to focus on the progress of democracy, Whitman attempts to situate himself in relation to past literatures in order to show how American literature progresses along with democracy. For example, in "Song of the Exposition" Whitman invokes the muses and asks them to journey to America. The muses function in this poem symbolically as the inspiration of Old World literature.

Before his invocation of the muses, he provides a summation of creation:

But to bring perhaps from afar what is already founded,  
To give it our own identity, average, limitless, free,  
To fill the gross the torpid bulk with vital religious fire,  
Not to repel or destroy so much as accept, fuse, rehabilitate. (1, 5-8)

Whitman does not suggest that the poet or the American worker reject the past—he or she should reshape it so that it reflects his or her own life. As the quotation at the beginning of the chapter suggests, Americans should take the Old World's past and put on it a "democratic physiognomy." For Whitman, a poem's material is not original; however, it is reshaped and made new.<sup>4</sup> The past, for all of Whitman's stress on a new, Adamic beginning, does play a role in the present.

After the discussion of creation in "Song of the Exposition," the speaker invokes the muses in a way that is similar to that of Andrés Bello in his attempted American epic. Like Bello, Whitman asks the muses to come from Europe to America, where "a

better, fresher, busier sphere, a wide, untried domain / awaits, demands you" (2, 7). During this invocation Whitman calls the traditions of Europe "overpaid accounts" (2,2). Whitman's calling on the muses is similar to the traditional invocation of the muse in epic poetry, except that this account occurs one-third of the way through the text. He has essentially already begun without the muses and now invokes them to come to a country that "awaits, demands." His invocation while traditional—he is invoking the classical Western muse—has elements that are necessarily different from past invocations of the muse. Unlike past poets' relation to the classical muses, Whitman claims the American poet has an active relation with these divinities. This feature becomes more apparent through the poem. In the beginning we are introduced to a literary technique that appears familiar, but by the end of the poem the traditional relationship between the poet and the muses shifts dramatically. In other words, Whitman changes the customary image of inspiration to suit his democratic beliefs. He portrays himself as a citizen of a country awaiting literature inspired by the muses and then demands attention from the literary culture of the Old World by appropriating its muses.

In the third section of "Song of the Exposition," Whitman states that the muse is already present in the poem and in the surroundings; he says, "She's here, install'd among the kitchen ware!" (3, 38). She is placed among common goods. Furthermore, in the next section the poet tries to calm the muse's fears:

Fear not O Muse! truly new ways and days receive, surround you,  
I candidly confess a queer, queer race, of novel fashion,  
And yet the same old human race, the same within, without. (4, 5-7)



The poet switches jobs with the muse and explains her situation to her. For the rest of the poem the poet retains the position of muse, with the Old World muse listening to the teachings of the New World. His focus on an American idiom stresses the difference in setting from the New to the Old World. The speaker explains that new architecture will be built as “sacred industry” (5, 10) and will represent “all the workmen of the world” (5, 26). It will be better than “Egypt’s tombs / Fairer than Grecia’s, Roma’s temples” (5, 5-6). Whitman claims the New World’s products will far surpass any project inspired by the muse in the Old World.

The speaker tells the muses in section six:

And here shall ye inhabit powerful Matrons!  
In your vast state vaster than all the old,  
Echoed through long, long centuries to come,  
To sounds of different, prouder songs, with stronger themes,  
Practical, peaceful life, the people’s life, the People themselves. (6, 8-12)

As if he were teaching the muses, he explains where they will stay in the future and what they will sing. Their songs will be concerned with teaching “the average man the glory of his daily walk and trade” (7, 17). Whitman takes the muses from the Old World and rewrites them into a new position in the New World. They metamorphose from being figures that are used by the aristocracy into the inspiring force behind democratic literature; however, the American poet must teach them first how to inspire. One can note similarities between Whitman’s thoughts on the New World providing a new stage for poetry and Hegel’s idea that spirit passes through the stage of art as it moves towards absolute spirit.

In section seven the speaker stresses the function of the New World poet:

I say I bring thee Muse to-day and here  
All occupations, duties broad and close

.....  
Whatever forms the average, strong, complete, sweet-blooded man or  
woman, the perfect longeve personality. (7, 27-34)

The poet imitates the action, bringing to the muse instead of the other way around. The muse is merely “guest and sister.” Since future democracies need creative inspiration, the muse must be retained, yet the speaker must educate the muse on the inevitable progress of democracy. His version of the muse as presented here is a diminished form of that present in the epic poetry of Homer. This muse, which verges on parody, is a useful vestige of Old World literature that aids in qualifying New World literature as of equal or higher worth than past literatures. While this poem is one that reshapes the goals of literature, at the same time it attempts to clear away the clutter of European precursors.<sup>5</sup>

In his rewriting of the past to create a vision of democratic progression, Whitman uses several constant images, such as the sun’s progressing over all, the child as poet, the flow of music, and the most prevalent, the image of voyaging. In many poems, such as “Starting from Paumanok,” “Song of the Open Road,” “Song of Myself,” and “To Thee Old Cause,” the voyage motif connects to the inevitable progress of democracy. For example, in “Thou Mother With Thy Equal Brood,” the speaker states:

Sail, sail thy best, ship of Democracy,  
Of value is thy freight, 'tis not the Present only,  
The Past is also stored in thee. (4, 1-3).

Democracy is portrayed as a traveling ship that contains the present and the past.

Again, in “Song of the Open Road” Whitman discusses the universe’s motion as the “progress of souls” (13, 16). He explains the souls’ journey as one along the open road, which is also the “public road” (4, 4) that accepts all races and genders and allows one

to do whatever he or she desires. This road is connected with progress, and in the last lines of the poem, the speaker addresses the reader to ask, “Will you come travel with me?” (15, 10). As with the myth of progress throughout *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman’s goal is to forward democratic ideals by influencing the reader into believing in a democratic lifestyle.

For Whitman, the progress myth stresses that all things are moving inexorably towards democracy. Technology is rapidly increasing. Land is opening in the West for each person to have his or her own space. Nature is paving the way for the common person. By dissolving class systems, progress is leveling the field, both economically and intellectually, for the common person, while at the same time it is raising the common person to a certain level of power—or at least this is what Whitman dramatizes in order to democratize his readers’ sensibilities. His rewriting of history to portray this mythic vision is used as a rhetorical device to foster democracy. However, this rewriting of history defines Whitman’s view of history as primarily textual. Essentially, Whitman sees all time as connected in the present. This viewpoint is not unusual for writers in the Americas. For example, Gabriel García Márquez, following Faulkner’s lead, discusses the past as always part of the present. Yet Whitman does not only mean that past events remain to structure the present. For Whitman, history is *in* the present since history is understood through language. This idea of history allows Whitman the potential to rewrite history to reflect the democratic ideals which inform *Leaves of Grass*. For Whitman history is never an impersonal force outside of human control, for that would imply the insignificance of the individual. Individuals are linked inextricably to democracy’s progress, which for Whitman is at the core of his presentation of history.

Whitman's view of history has been interpreted by several critics, such as Lalli, as cyclical since Whitman insists that all time is connected (23). Time's interconnectedness here, while it does lend itself to cyclical reading—Whitman tends to present cycles when discussing the future—, is not primarily cyclical. History progresses, and those who die do not disappear, but they do not continue to play their same roles, as William Butler Yeats was fond of thinking. Of the dead Whitman states:

They are alive and well somewhere,  
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,  
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end  
to arrest it,  
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,  
And to die is different from what any one supposed. (*Song of Myself* 6-27-33)

The people and objects of the past do not disappear; they remain as all things remain. The soul's immortality is part of the network that connects all things, as Whitman reveals in "On the Beach at Night Alone":

All lives and deaths, all of the past, present, future,  
This vast similitude spans them, and always has spann'd,  
And shall forever span them and compactly hold and enclose them. (12-14)

In this poem Whitman shows that the past, present, and future are connected, but he does not say that they all exist in the present; however, in other poems he expresses this sentiment. For example in "With Antecedents," he has the past and future join in the present:

I know that the past was great and the future will be great,  
And I know that both curiously conjoint in the present time,  
(For the sake of him I typify, for the common average man's sake,  
your sake if you are he,)  
And that where I am or you are this present day, there is the centre

of all days, all races,  
And there is the meaning to us of all that has ever come of races  
and days, or ever will come. (3, 3-7 )

Time is indeed connected; moreover, it is connected primarily in the common person.

Time radiates from the present both to the past and to the future. All that has ever happened is filtered through the present moment. In many ways Whitman's thought is similar to Thoreau's statement in *Walden*: "I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment" (20). Like Thoreau, Whitman says, "We stand amid time beginningless and endless" ("With Antecedents" 2, 4). Whitman agrees that the past and future are "two eternities"; however, his placement of the individual at the center of the past and the future means that the individual is in the position of creating what he or she experiences as history, which Whitman encourages his readers to understand as democratic progress. Moreover, time contains a democratic element, as the quotation above shows, in that it centers on the individual in the present.

Whitman stresses this democratic element of time in "I Was Looking a Long While:"

I was looking a long while for Intentions,  
For a clew to the history of the past for myself, and for these  
chants--and now I have found it,  
It is not in those paged fables in the libraries, (them I neither  
accept nor reject,)  
It is no more in the legends than in all else,  
It is in the present-- it is this earth to-day,  
It is in Democracy-- (the purport and aim of all the past). (1-6)

The myth of historical progress has democracy at the center, and the past of *Leaves of Grass* and Whitman's own past are in the present. This version of the past is specific to the individual.

In many poems Whitman stresses that a personal understanding of history should be attempted by the individual. This idea is common in his work, for Whitman often states that readers should experience aspects of life for themselves. In *Song of Myself*, he states:

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look  
through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in  
books,  
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,  
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self. (2, 22-24)

His claim is that even the viewpoint that he provides should not substitute for one's own experience of life firsthand. One needs to take in and filter life; Whitman intends his poetry to facilitate this process. In "For Him I Sing," he states:

For him I sing,  
I raise the present on the past,  
(As some perennial tree out of its roots, the present on the past,)  
With time and space I him dilate and fuse the immortal laws,  
To make himself by them the law unto himself. (1-5)

The past is part of the present as the roots of a tree are the tree's beginnings. This statement could be used to argue that the past structures the present, which Whitman argues is accomplished in ways through language—this point is a primary reason for creating a distinctly American literature with a specifically American language.

Furthermore, Whitman's stress on the individual and his or her understanding of history is typical of his desire to create the American democratic individual. He hopes the reader will become completely independent, even independent of written histories, which might contain Old World notions of history.

Along with encouraging individuals to understand history on their own, Whitman discusses in various poems the poet's task as that of a writer of history and as the spark

for others to understand their own histories. In “Song of the Answerer,” a poem about the poet’s abilities, he states that poems “give you to form for yourself poems, religions, politics, war, / peace, behavior, histories, essays, daily life, and everything / else” (2, 24-25). We have already discussed how Whitman intended to influence daily life, morals, and contemporary politics through poetry. In this poem he focuses on the poet’s triggering others’ versions of history by placing himself, the poet, as central to the process of time. First, he portrays all people as waiting for the poet, the answerer: “Him all wait for” (1, 7). People await the poet as an interpreter and a center. Different types of people imagine the poet to be like themselves. When he speaks, he acts like a center to ignite others, so the poet through his poetry provides a point of departure, though his acting as a spark does not mean that the poet forgets the past. For Whitman, the poet writes history through the poem and in the present. This idea especially appears in *Drum-Taps*, the section of *Leaves of Grass* that most interests many historians. In these poems Whitman acts as witness to events, yet even here the central issue is democracy—whether it will survive or fail, whether or not it is strengthened by the war. For Whitman, the poet’s role, especially in an American lyric-epic, is to be a prophet of history.

Whitman’s focus on the present as the space through which the past and the future are created brings him to the point of suggesting that he can write future’s history, as he states in “To Thee Old Cause,” “I project the history of the future” (7). He develops a similar idea in *Song of Myself*, this time using domestic imagery, with moments collapsing as tired old flowers in bone dry vases: “The past and present wilt--I have fill'd them, emptied them. / And proceed to fill my next fold of the future” (51, 1-2 ).

This does not mean that Whitman believes that he can literally write the future unfolding of events; rather, since he views history as primarily textual, as a story which resides in language, he assumes that he can project the path of history by crafting the language that the future will use. This goal is central to *Leaves of Grass* since he imagined it as a “language experiment” that would be seminal to the growth of America. Whitman’s gift to America of a democratic language would provide the means of avoiding hierarchical Old World structures. By creating a democratic language, Whitman was not trying to configure an American history, a static history; rather, through his democratic language he intended to foster a democratic way to conceive history. While the form of history that he suggests is inclusive and tolerant, it does not specify an angle through which to view history.

That said, while Whitman attempts to create an American perception of history, he does often mention the future in his poetry and even tries to project the future’s history. *Leaves of Grass*, like later American lyric-epics, is not concerned primarily with the past—this aspect of the American epic differs from European epics. *Leaves of Grass* places the value of its persuasive argument in the future. The future will embody the text, and since Whitman tries to provide the language of the future, the text is his script for it.

Perhaps the most critically discussed of his future-oriented poems is “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”; however, to say that the poem only addresses the future fails to acknowledge its structure, for it is about Whitman’s crossing from Brooklyn to Manhattan on the ferry and how this crossing is connected with the crossing of people in the past and the future. About his crossing, he gives the specific time of day, “sun



there half an hour high" (2), yet time appears to collapse during the progress of the poem. In mentioning multiple seasons, winter and summer, he shifts tenses among past, present, and future. At times he speaks about himself and others from the past, yet within lines he switches to discuss future ferry passengers. Moreover, the trip that he describes is circular, as if it continually repeated in time; people go out and return on the ferry. He stresses the continual motion through time by dispensing with narrative advancement in the poem. He discusses specific scenes from the crossing, but the scenes do not add up to a narrative describing the trip in linear fashion. Diverse critics, such as Betsy Erkkila and Gay Wilson Allen, suggest that the poem's motion is not straight forward, but that it imitates the flux of time that it describes.<sup>6</sup> Through these fluctuations, Whitman stresses the connection between people in the past, present, and future: "It avails not, time nor place—distance avail not" (3, 1). He uses direct address to speak to the reader as "you." He asks of the reader, "What is it then between us?" (5, 1). The question fosters a sense of connection, as does the river which begins the first and last sections of the poem: "Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face" (1, 1) and "Flow on river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide" (9,1). The constancy of the river's flow acts to connect people in the past, present, and future. He suggests that all people will have similar experiences in the river crossing. This idea emphasizes his connections to individuals in all times, while it presents the connectivity of time.<sup>7</sup> His portrayal of multiple time and connectivity at once focuses on and eliminates time. Time essentially becomes stopped in the present, and the speaker reads forwards and backwards from that position.

Related to this idea of reading from the present, Whitman's use of direct address creates poetry that appears present in the future. In other words, he uses prolepsis. Whitman wants to create a sense of presence even once he is dead. Yeats attempted a similar creation of presence by having "Under Ben Bulbin," a poem that tells about where Yeats is laid in death, published in a newspaper just after his death. Through this posthumous voice of the poet, Yeats meant his poetry to have presence. In a similar fashion Whitman's reader addresses provide the impression of the dead poet continuing in life; moreover, they stress how the present is interlaced with the future and the past through the text. The reader's reading of the text creates the sense of presence in which the future and the past are conceived—the reader reads the dead poet as alive through the text; thus, the text contains the past and the future in the present.

Not all of Whitman's poems about the future are placed in an apparent flux of time. For example, in "Thou Mother With Thy Equal Brood," Whitman discusses his vision of the future for the American populace. This vision is his way of both stating what he envisions as democratic culture and creating that vision. At the beginning of the poem, he states his objective:

I'd show away ahead thy real Union, and how it may be accomplish'd.

The paths to the house I seek to make,  
But leave to those to come the house itself.

Belief I sing, and preparation;  
As Life and Nature are not great with reference to the present only,  
But greater still from what is yet to come,  
Out of that formula for thee I sing. (7-13)

Whitman is not claiming to write the future, but to show a way to conceive of history in a democratic fashion; he leaves the future action, as he of course must, to the individuals

who follow him. He mentions that the act of envisioning the future will be an act of totally recasting all that is the past as received from Europe. Whitman believed that the United States as a nation did not have any history of its own, for what it had was from the Old World. In order to use this European legacy, Whitman states that it must be recast, and it is through the recasting of the past that one creates the modern and thus the future. He states:

Brain of the New World, what a task is thine,  
To formulate the Modern—out of the peerless grandeur of the  
modern,  
Out of thyself, comprising science, to recast poems, churches, art,  
(Recast, maybe discard them, end them—maybe their work is done,  
who knows?)  
By vision, hand, conception, on the background of the mighty past,  
the dead,  
To limn with absolute faith the mighty living present. (“Thou Mother” 3, 1-6)

The act of creating the modern is the act of the mind’s recasting the past or discarding it as necessary. It is a process of creation, as the verb limn suggests, with certain characteristically American ideas. In this poem the conceptual creation of the future is by the individual; Whitman suggests that the individual can create a democratic future through his or her “own unloosen’d mind.” On the one hand, he emphasizes that democracy will reach its summit only through the creation of democratically minded individuals. On the other hand, he suggests with the myth of progress that democracy will continue to move forward no matter what. This apparent conflict is a microcosmic view of Whitman’s vision of history. History is textually based and is thus created in the present so that one can read/rewrite history according to different schemes, such as one of progress where history moves forward toward a final goal of democratic life. Whitman’s writing of a lyric-epic is one step in rewriting history toward such a goal.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Whitman's poem "Roaming in Thought (*After Reading Hegel*)" displays his familiarity with Hegel's view of historical progression:

Roaming in thought over the Universe, I saw the little that is Good  
steadily hastening towards immortality,  
And the vast all that is call'd Evil I saw hastening to merge itself and  
become lost and dead.

<sup>2</sup> When Whitman mentions the term organic, he intends it to mean something fundamental to the constitution of a being or thing. He does not use organic in reference primarily to "natural" products as is often the case today.

<sup>3</sup> Neruda also uses a biblical model for displaying a new beginning in Latin America.

<sup>4</sup> For an article that examines Whitman's ideas on originality and history, see Joseph Kronick's "On the Border of History: Whitman and the American Sublime."

<sup>5</sup> Price suggests that Whitman's rejection of the past is a defense mechanism (4). However, Whitman does not completely reject the past; he rearranges the past textually to fit a democratic society.

<sup>6</sup> See Allen's *A Reader's Guide to Walt Whitman*, 190-191.

<sup>7</sup> Erkkila reads this poem as an attempt to find union. She believes that it was written in response to the collapse of social structures and the fragmentation of the Union (143). For this reason Whitman stresses connectivity. As this poem was first published in 1856, this is an interesting reading; however, by far the most popular reading of this poem is as an attempt to show how human beings are connected spiritually.

## Chapter 5: Whitman and Poetics

To have great poets, there must be great audiences, too.

Whitman (*Poetry* 1082)

The attempt to create a lyric-epic work that would contain history and provide an underlying sense of camaraderie and other democratic values required Whitman to use a new poetics. In essence, Whitman views his task as creative for poetry and for the reader—he wants to inculcate a certain type of democratic sensibility, and that requires reader participation in the text. Whitman suggests on several occasions that “To have great poets, there must be great audiences” (*Poetry* 1082). He encountered a conceptual gridlock that if one wants to be read in a certain way, then one must have readers who read in that certain style. His great audience would have to be democratic to relate to the poem’s democratic personality that in turn serves as a paradigm for his readers. This writing situation, i.e. poem and reader feeding off of each other, necessitates the poem’s creation of its own poetics. In other words, to have democratic readers, Whitman must constitute a poetics for his readers to use. This idea proceeds logically from the notion that a new political system must have citizens that support it and that its citizens can be partially educated through a literature that espouses the political system. With a new system of literature, new readers are needed to experience that literature fully; however, since the literature is intended to educate those readers, the literature must make its own poetics, a poetics which instructs the readers on how to read it.

The argument could be made that all poetic texts and/or poets constitute their own poetics. Yet, most poets make only minor changes to a tradition. Thus, they are read differently from other writers as a result of stylistic changes; moreover, often

reading their works according to their own attempts at a poetics could be just as insightful as reading with the aid of a specific theoretical apparatus, such as that of Virilio, Lacan, Marx, or Prigogine.<sup>1</sup> However, Whitman's creation of a poetics is central to his task of creating a democratic poetry and, at least theoretically, a democratic culture. Instead of minor changes to the tradition, Whitman attempted a radical overhaul for his specific purposes. To perform this overhaul Whitman relied on many techniques, such as open form. This chapter explores how he creates reader-participation, how he views the persona of the poet, and how he makes formal changes as a means of creating a poetics meant to influence the way in which *Leaves of Grass* is read. Essentially, along with creating the lyric-epic, he attempted to create the way it was read.

For Whitman, the reader is integral to the goal of the text. Without the reader the text would not create any change, nor, in Whitman's view, would it exist in society's consciousness. In "A Song For Occupations," Whitman puts forth this idea:

We consider bibles and religions divine—I do not say they are not  
divine,  
I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still,  
It is not they who give the life, it is you who give the life,  
Leaves are not more shed from the trees, or trees from the earth, than  
they are shed out of you.

.....  
List close my scholars dear,  
Doctrines, politics and civilization may exurge from you,  
Sculpture and monuments and any thing inscribed anywhere are  
tallied in you,  
The gist of all histories and statistics as far back as the records reach is  
in you this hour, and myths and tales the same,  
If you were not breathing and walking here, where would they all be?  
The most renown'd poems would be ashes, orations and plays would  
be vacuums. (3, 25-4,11)

Whitman stresses first that ideas grow out of people and depend upon people for their existence. Myths, religions, and stories without anyone to know them would cease to exist; Whitman refers to this state of a text as a vacuum, the text locked within itself without a reader. To use Aristotle's terms, it exists potentially, if not physically destroyed, but is not actualized.<sup>2</sup> Whitman discusses a similar idea metaphorically in "Roots and Leaves Themselves Alone" when he equates the poems of *Leaves of Grass* with roots and leaves—a common comparison in his work—and he states that the roots and leaves will not bring forth any form without the help of "you," the reader:

If you bring the warmth of the sun they will open and bring  
form, color, perfume to you,  
If you become the aliment and the wet they will become flowers,  
fruits, tall branches and trees. (9)

He compares his poems to plants that need more than themselves to grow. This comparison stresses the organic metaphor that runs throughout *Leaves of Grass*. The reader bringing the necessary nutritives for the text to flower is presented as natural. Without the sun and water, plants die, yet with these conditions plants thrive and multiply. The text has something to provide the reader; however, the reader must actualize the text.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that the reader creates the meaning of the text; rather, the reader becomes the text, i.e. actualizes the democratic worldview exposed by *Leaves of Grass*. This focus on reader participation is necessary for democratic change to occur in the reader.

On a related note, Whitman often uses his focus on reader participation in the text as a way to empower the reader. Many times the reader as participant is specifically addressed in the role of the poet; Whitman often refers to "you" as future poets. In addressing the reader in the role of a creator, he stresses that readers should

not copy him, but that they should develop their own ideas. Specifically, the democratic reader should not ape what is presented as democratic poetry, but that reader should create his or her own version of democratic poetry because ultimately such poetry gains its qualities from the individual. In *Song of Myself* Whitman confesses that he simply points the way:

No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,  
I have not chair, no church, no philosophy,  
I lead no man to a dinner-table, library, exchange,  
But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,  
My left hand hooking you round the waist,  
My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road.

Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you. (46, 4-10)

Whitman reassures that he is not pressing any creeds on anyone, but that he only wants to point out the road that one should travel upon. Rhetorically, he wants to create a sense of openness, of freedom, empowering the reader with this sense of freedom.<sup>4</sup>

A few lines later he addresses the reader as a son:

Shoulder your duds dear son, and I will mine, and let us hasten forth,  
Wonderful cities and free nations we shall fetch as we go  
.....  
Sit a while dear son,  
Here are biscuits to eat and here is milk to drink,  
But as soon as you sleep and renew yourself in sweet clothes, I kiss  
    you with a good-by kiss and open the gate for your egress  
    hence.

Long enough have you dream'd contemptible dreams,  
Now I wash the gum from your eyes,  
You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every  
    moment of your life. (46, 15-30)

The reader is imagined as the son—a product of the procreant urge of the book, but the image of the son also signifies a separate person only just starting out on the proper road to democracy. The son is encouraged to go forth with the father to catch cities and



“free” nations. Like the “you” in “Song of the Open Road,” Whitman encourages the reader to join him in heading towards wonder and freedom, both rhetorically inviting terms. The reader’s past is envisioned as bounded by “contemptible dreams,” but the future holds glories that will remove the reader’s illusions, just as the sun in Plato’s allegory of the cave. Whitman portrays poetry as a way to renew the reader. Edward Wheat discusses *Leaves of Grass* as a therapeutic work because, according to him, it is intended to heal the reader with the cure of democracy (236). The speaker gives the reader food and drink and says that he will open the gate, gatekeeper being a privileged position like that of Saint Peter, when the reader is rested. The speaker does not want to control the son; rather, acting in a paternal fashion, he wishes to teach the reader, the son, values that will help him live what the father imagines as a good life—in Whitman’s case the good life is the democratic life.

In the next section of “Song of Myself,” Whitman stresses that he only starts the reader on the correct path:

I am the teacher of athletes,  
He that by me spreads a wider breast than my own proves the width  
of my own,  
He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.  
(47,1-3)

Athletes are mentioned in *Leaves of Grass* frequently, most often as the ideal types for future Americans. Since Whitman claims no separation in the soul and the body, the ideal person for him is charged physically and intellectually. The person that learns becomes Whitman’s ideal of the American individual and destroys the teacher by ultimately actualizing the style. Full actualization of his poetics theoretically would no longer be a reading of the poems. Democratic individuals in action theoretically would

not need to read Whitman's work, except as a type of biblical sourcebook that they go to in times of need. However, a few lines later Whitman amends his statement slightly:

I teach straying from me, yet who can stray from me?  
I follow you whoever you are from the present hour,  
My words itch at your ears till you understand them. (47, 11-13)

These lines can be read in several ways. First, if the reader actualizes the text, then he or she does not stray from the poet because he or she has fulfilled the poet's goal. Second, the speaker posits a claim for authority on the part of the text. Once the poem is read, a reader cannot avoid the attempt to understand it. A similar claim is made in the beginning of the Koran, and such a claim assumes special authority on the part of the text. Third, once the reader brings the text to life through reading, the text will remain with the reader. It will exist, and the reader will be a container of that existence; the reader's part is not that of creating the total significance but that of actualizing the text, of becoming the text.

Whitman furthers the connection between himself and his reader by stressing a sexual or bodily connection between reader and poet. Images of procreation occur often, as mentioned before, and they crop up at times in connection to the reader. Considering that the reader is necessary to Whitman's poetics, this procreative imagery is consistent with the reader's experience of the text. For example, in "So Long" Whitman states:

Camerado, this is no book,  
Who touches this touches a man,  
(Is it night? are we here together alone?)  
It is I you hold and who holds you,  
I spring from the pages into your arms—decease calls me forth. (53-57)

Whitman stresses physical images in this passage, primarily touch. The image is also one of lovers touching each other in the night. By reading, the reader allows the dead person, the poet, to come to life from the pages. A few lines later the speaker states, "Dear friend whoever you are take this kiss" (64). The reader is invited to connect bodily with the text, which, taken metaphorically as it must be, encourages the reader to bring the text to life in his or her own life. This direct address to the reader is also used rhetorically to create a sense of closeness. Instead of presenting the reader with a story that can remain in some ways objectified, repeated appeals to a "you" create a conversational tone and actively involve the reader. This sense of closeness that Whitman achieves through his poetic style is also a first step in fostering camaraderie among his readers. He presents himself as a comrade in order to convince his readers to take on the role of comrade, a closeness that is easier to achieve in the lyric-epic than in the epic.

Whitman does give guidelines for the actualization of his text by presenting a paradigm of a democratic persona. Whitman embraces his ideal and writes it into his persona. When Whitman states in "So Long," "Camerado, this is no book, / who touches this touches a man," the man presented is not the historical Whitman, even though he was notorious for self-promotion. He wrote several anonymous reviews of *Leaves of Grass* in praise of the original American artist, and he fabricated facts of his life in numerous conversations; he even helped a biographer write his life by providing fanciful facts. In considering the creation of his persona, critics, such as Betsy Erkkila and Justin Kaplan, often discuss it in terms of the pictures of himself that he added to the editions. In the first edition, he placed an image of himself with his shirt partially

open and with the clothes and stance of a working man. This image promotes him as the common American. In the middle editions, he portrays himself as more stately, less like a working person, and more like a professional poet. In the later editions, he presents himself with a long beard, as a prophet or natural man. In other words, both in life and in *Leaves of Grass* he was concerned with creating a specific persona. In the text this persona is an independent poet willing to try different methods. His persona is one who will accept anyone or any ideas and one who values freedom above all else. He takes on the role of the singer of America and also the prophet of the America's future. Most of all he presents himself as the common, democratic individual, this last image primarily the one that he wants as a paradigm for other Americans. He exhorts the reader in "To a Pupil," "Rest not till you rivet and publish of yourself of your own Personality" (7). He wants his persona to be a guide for establishing a democratic personality, but the reader must go through the process of self-creation on his or her own. This line is intended as an answer for the first line of this poem, "Is reform needed? Is it through you?" (1). Creating and pushing forth your own democratic personality is one way that Whitman envisions change for the better. Reform for Whitman ultimately begins with a reformation of the individual, and that for him must start through poetry.

Whitman boasts that his poetry will spawn future poets. The "you" presented is often future poets. Fully actualized, his poetry will issue forth new, democratic poets who will write poetry in their own individual styles. He expresses this sentiment in "Poets to Come":

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!  
Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,

But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than  
before known,  
Arouse! for you must justify me.

.....  
I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a  
casual look upon you and then averts his face,  
Leaving it to you to prove and define it,  
Expecting the main things from you. (1-10)

This passage dramatizes the main political force of *Leaves of Grass*: producing a “new brood” of democratic individuals. The passage also stresses that the poets of the future will be the poets in the democratic image Whitman has produced through the text. They will be the text actualized. Future poets, who can easily be read as any readers, will “prove and define” the text by being democratic. The future poets will work with democratic principles and thus will extend the poetics that Whitman begun. In a similar vein in “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” Whitman invokes the poets of the future: “Bards for my own land only I invoke . . . Bards of the great Idea!” (20, 5-9). These poets are those who are native and willing to extricate themselves completely from the past. In other words, he encourages poets to take up his poetic of reshaping material from the past into something individual.

Whitman does not suggest that the task of becoming a democratic poet will be easy. In fact he says the opposite: the task will be difficult indeed. In “Whoever You Are Holding Me in Hand,” he warns that those who continue his way of writing will have to begin anew:

The way is suspicious, the result uncertain, perhaps destructive,  
You would have to give up all else, I alone would expect to be your  
sole and exclusive standard,  
Your novitiate would even be long and exhausting,  
The whole past theory of your life and all conformity to the lives  
around you would have to be abandon’d,  
Therefore release me now before troubling yourself any further, let

go your hand from my shoulder. (7-11)

The first line is similar to his description of poetic creation. In taking up past material through the text, the poet must sift through it all to see what can be reshaped for his or her own specific purpose. The poet must be able to discard as needed. Moreover, these lines also suggest that remaking oneself through Whitman's paradigm of the democratic individual might be destructive to one's present way of life. To become a democratic individual, a person must eschew any conformity. One would need to experience life directly and develop one's own poetics, which consequently would be a way of using Whitman's poetics. His address to the reader in the last line is similar to the warnings that Dante gives occasionally in the *Divine Comedy*. Whitman suggests, like Dante, that if one continues, then one should be ready for change. This idea portrays a premise of Whitman's, and later Neruda's, about writing: poetry can affect life outside of the text. For Whitman, it is ultimately through artistic mediums that we conceptualize our lives.

For all of Whitman's insistence on reader participation, he often expresses doubt that the reader can know the poet's true self. Doubt concerning knowledge of the self occurs often in *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman explores facets of the self, such as the persona exhibited daily, the persona on display with friends, the "Me Myself"—the essential self—, and the eternal self. For example, in "Are You The New Person Drawn Towards Me?" the speaker states:

Are you the new person drawn towards me?  
To begin with take warning, I am surely far different from what you  
suppose;  
Do you suppose you will find in me your ideal?  
Do you think it is so easy to have me become your lover?  
Do you think the friendship of me would be unalloy'd satisfaction?

Do you think I am trusty and faithful?  
Do you see no further than this façade, this smooth and tolerant  
manner of me?  
Do you suppose yourself advancing on real ground toward a real  
heroic man?  
Have you no thought O dreamer that it may be all maya, illusion?

In these lines Whitman reveals main aspects of his persona: the ideal person, the lover, the friend (comrade), the tolerant person. His questions hinge on his persona. On the one hand, this poem could be read as the difficulty of knowing the essence of any person. This idea is familiar, having shown up among many thinkers, including Thomas Aquinas. Knowing certain facts or characteristics about someone does not necessarily allow you to know that person. On the other hand, the “it” from the last line can be read as aspects of his persona. Thus, the question concerning whether “it” is an illusion could be answered yes if the textual construction of a persona is considered illusion. This affirmative answer does not cause a problem for the reader’s actualizing his or her own personality. By showing readers another version of the self, such an interpretation does lead readers into defining their own personalities which brings up another aspect of the poet as the one who will awaken the reader.

Since Whitman wants to cultivate a democratic culture through his lyric-epic, he presents his poetic as one of rebellion and change. To become a democratic individual, one must change from one’s present way of life. Since Whitman believes that the change is fundamental, he presents it as total and often difficult. To facilitate the change he casts himself as teacher; his poetry, he assumes, will make the reader see that any life other than the democratic one is not natural. In “To You” he discusses the importance of the individual and the necessity for a change in lifestyle:

Whoever you are, I fear you are walking the walks of dreams,

I fear these supposed realities are to melt from under your feet and hands,  
Even now your features, joys, speech, house, trade, manners, troubles,  
follies, costume, crimes, dissipate from you

Whoever you are, now I place my hand upon you, that you be my  
poem,  
I whisper with my lips close to your ear

.....  
None has understood you, but I understand you,  
None has done justice to you, you have not done justice to yourself. (1-14)

He says that the reader might be living with a false conception of reality. The fear is that of the reader's confusion at change. Although Whitman fosters change through his poetry, he fears that the reader will be lost. Much of the rest of the poem is concerned with how he will sing songs celebrating the reader, really paeans to the individual; thus, they show the reader how to create the democratic lifestyle. The "supposed realities" infuse everything about one's life, i.e. "speech, house, trade," and when the reader reads, realizes the poems—as Whitman says in "Full of Life Now," his or her worldview begins to shift, or at least Whitman hopes that it shifts. Whitman's suggestion "that you be my poem" can be read in this light. By actualizing the poem, the reader in a sense becomes the poem. The reader will be "created"—created as a democratic individual; thus, he or she will be "a making" in the original sense of the poem as poesis. Again, rhetorically Whitman focuses on a physical closeness with the reader and mentions that he alone understands the "you." He has a special knowledge about the reader's person, including a knowledge of which the reader is unaware. Rhetorically, this statement is not meant to belittle the reader; rather, it is encouragement. Whitman continues this type of encouragement throughout the remainder of the poem by stressing the importance of the reader as individual. He states, "I only am he who



places over you no master, owner, better, God / beyond what waits intrinsically in yourself" (17-18). He wants to teach the reader the importance of the individual and the importance of personally experiencing the self. Inherent within this encouragement is the push to be completely free from organized religious beliefs, law, or any class system, where the reader might imagine others as better. Whitman believes his poetics is dependent on the reader, but inherent within this belief is the function of his poetry in teaching the reader how and what to read into his poem. Through the poetry, the poems inform the reader of American poetics as Whitman sees it. In this function, Whitman believes that his poetry constitutes the birth of a new poetic tradition in the United States, a tradition which will support a democratic government.

### I. Democratic Poetic Forms

Whitman uses form in an attempt to present a democratic poetics. He assumes that Americans need forms that are not connected to traditional poetic forms. Old forms contain the systems that created them, while new forms encourage new systems. In "Ventures, on an Old Theme," he states that poetry in America must be rethought; it can no longer contain forms that are not inherent. He states:

In my opinion the time has arrived to essentially break down the barriers of form between prose and poetry. . . the truest and greatest *Poetry*, (while subtly and necessarily always rhythmic, and distinguishable easily enough,) can never again, in the English language, be express'd in arbitrary and rhyming meter. (*Poetry* 1080)

Traditional forms are bankrupt in the United States because they do not express the democratic culture. Rhyme, traditional structures, and traditional meter become vehicles of past poetry for Whitman. Poetry must incorporate elements of prose.<sup>5</sup> The lines should not have traditional breaks, for the length should be dictated by the content.

In other words Whitman felt that the poem should grow organically from the poet's experience. Essentially, the poem, like the experience, should be original each time.<sup>6</sup> This poetics allows for other poets to be completely individual since their poems would differ from his own. Moreover, in his attempt to transform poetry into prose, he stresses fact instead of idea or symbol. Larzer Ziff suggests that this shift is appropriate for the United States since Americans are inclined to facts over ideas (55). Poetry, for Whitman, should deal with the facts of the present day, as he states in "Ventures on an Old Theme": "In these States, beyond all precedent, poetry will have to do with actual facts, with the concrete States, and—or we have not much more than begun—with the definitive getting into shape of the Union. Indeed I sometimes think *it* alone is to define the Union" (*Poetry* 1081). For Whitman, American poets should write in a common language, capturing the essence of the people and places where it is written. Moreover, poets should write out of their everyday lives, which should not be the life primarily of a writer. Poets will live the same type of lives as everyone else, and from those they will gather their materials:

Poets here, literats here, are to rest on organic bases different from the basis of other countries; not a class set apart, circling only in the circle of themselves, modest and pretty, desperately scratching for rhymes, pallid with white paper, shut off, aware of the old pictures and traditions of the race, but unaware of the actual race around them (1357)

Whitman wants to level all difference between the poet and any other person, a desire that rests on his democratic principles. In *Leaves of Grass* he stresses that no one is more important than the individual and even suggests that the president is on the same level as the prostitute. Also, to express organically time and place, the poet must experience fully that time and place. This insistence on the organic nature of the

American poet is similar to Whitman's focus on the natural progression of democracy. He stresses that his poetics, like his view of history and politics, is founded on the "politics of nature." The form should be void of ornament. Whitman mentions this idea in the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*:

Of ornaments to a work nothing outre can be allowed . . . but those ornaments can be allowed that conform to the perfect facts of the open air and that flow out of the nature of the work and come irrepressible from it and are necessary to the completion of the work. (18)

The form should be open to change, yet it should express the rhythm and landscape of contemporary life, including the rhythms of the new technological frontiers being explored in the United States. Whitman's defining his organic form as natural is a rhetorical argument to be used by others. Also, since his poetry encourages a new style of poetry for each person, Whitman's poetry encourages at least partial renewal by each poet.

Even though Whitman does preach a new poetics for the United States, he does retain many traditional writing techniques. That is no surprise since he believes creation is a reshaping. Concerning traditional epic features, he uses the invocation, epic goals, the epic catalogue, the bardic tone, the biblical rhythms, and an episodic structure. However, unlike traditional epics, Whitman's poetry shifts quickly from narrative to non-narrative sections, often in the same poem. Along with the quick shifting, Whitman tries to incorporate many subjects into his work. He does not deem any topic necessarily off limits, or at least he does not present himself as doing so.<sup>7</sup> Rhetorically, he wants to foster the impression that his poetics is one of natural freedom. However, in keeping traditional elements he retains many familiar reading techniques to facilitate the reader. Unlike a poet like John Cage whose work requires a completely different way of

reading, Whitman creates a poetics out of the past tradition that supports his democratic and religious ideals. Essentially, Whitman wanted to reform the epic so that it could be used as a founding genre for a specifically American poetic tradition—a tradition defined by eschewing tradition. As a form the lyric-epic was new, but it retains features from both the lyric and epic traditions.

Since Whitman's ideas on organic poetry have been explored by many critics, they do not need to be discussed fully here; rather, it is enough to state that Whitman's poetics is intended to create new individuals and new ways of reading. These goals specifically support his writing of a lyric-epic work that can explain America to other countries and provide Americans with the tools to create a democratic culture to bolster the constitutional system already in place. His democratic ideals were the impetus of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and they continued to structure all aspects of his poetics through the remaining editions.

Before turning to Pablo Neruda, it should be mentioned that Whitman was not satisfied with the reading public's response to the early editions of *Leaves of Grass*. He hoped for immediate reaction and change. He believed that the American public would latch onto his book because the book had grown out of a desire for a specifically American work. Even though he worked hard to promote his book, the first few editions did not sell well, and he slowly turned away from the idea of immediate change. His book did become more popular among readers as he grew into old age, but as years went by he grew more frightened about the prospects of democracy. Many of his later poems include a global vision of democracy with the United States as a starting point for democracy's spread. This said, while *Leaves of Grass* attempts to be a lyric-epic of the

Americas, Whitman's primary focus is on the United States. He mentions both Canada and Mexico several times in the text, but he does not include them frequently in his discussions of democracy. Moreover, the other emerging nations of the New World in Latin America are hardly mentioned. Primarily interested in the United States, Whitman does not present colonial ambitions for Latin America, except for Mexico. Moreover, it is in the position as an advocate of democracy in the United States that Whitman has had the most impact on South American poets. Poets like Jose Martí, Rubén Darío, and Pablo Neruda looked to Whitman as the voice of the common person in the United States. Often while criticizing the political incursions of the United States into Latin America, these poets have invoked Whitman as a voice against United States policy.

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> By theoretical apparatuses I do not intend to suggest that these thinkers themselves are apparatuses; however, their theories have become tools through which to view text, so much so that critical interpretations are often dubbed by their names, i.e. Lacanian, Marxist, etc. . . .

<sup>2</sup> Actualization for Whitman is different from Roman Ingarden's *concretisation* in that for Ingarden there can be numerous concretisations—we might call them different readings; however, Whitman does not posit a total lack of interpretive boundaries.

<sup>3</sup> Several of the first editions of *Leaves of Grass* had roots and leaves engraved on the cover, as if to signify the growth of the book beyond the poems.

<sup>4</sup> Whitman's claim to be without a philosophy is rhetorical only. Like the speaker of Robert Frost's "Mending Wall," he presents himself as above or apart from artificial boundaries while at the same time he assists in establishing those boundaries. Whitman's boundaries are the democratic ideas. Thus, paradoxically he offers the reader freedom while at the same time confining that freedom to democracy.

<sup>5</sup> Although Whitman claims to tear down the barriers between poetry and prose, he retains the basic division in his own writing; however, he does break traditional line requirements so that his lines often appear to be prose lines. Yet, to claim that his writing is prose would be a stretch.

<sup>6</sup> While Whitman's organic poetics is theoretically appealing, it is difficult to practice. Many twentieth-century poets attempted organic forms. Some, like Allen Ginsberg, using Whitman as an example attempted to come up with ways of measuring the line "organically." Ginsberg and also Charles Olson, for example, state that the poetic line should be read in one breath. This theory, of course, makes it difficult for others besides the original poet to read the poem. Denise Levertov suggests that the poetic line should trace the poet's thought. This idea works better for the reader; however, theoretically it is hard to see since her line lengths change little.

<sup>7</sup> Following Whitman, Neruda considered any topic open to poetry, as his "Oda a los calcetines" ("Ode to Socks") shows.

## Chapter 6: Neruda's Latin American Political Poetics

Es una idea grandiosa pretender formar de todo el mundo nuevo una sola nación con un solo vínculo que ligue sus partes entre sí y con el todo.<sup>1</sup>

Simón Bolívar (*Carta de Jamaica*)

The problem of creating a new art proceeds entirely along the lines of the fundamental problem of constructing a Socialist culture.

Leon Trotsky (*Literature* 48)

Pablo Neruda's knowledge of Walt Whitman conditioned the writing of *Canto general* by providing *Leaves of Grass* as the lyric-epic paradigm; in addition, it conditioned his politics and his view of the poet's role in society. This chapter explores Neruda's politics and his attempt to provide a political sourcebook for communism through his lyric-epic. Crucial to an understanding of Neruda is discovering how much the Chilean poet knew about Whitman, for his espousal of Whitman along with his personal political history underpins his vision of politics as presented in *Canto general*.

### I. The Presence of Whitman in Neruda's Life and Work

Neruda's love for Whitman started in his youth; he stated that Whitman taught him to be an American. According to Neruda, Whitman took in all who were around him, i.e. slave, worker, etc. . . , and gave them dignity in his writing. Because of Whitman's radical democratic ideas, Neruda calls Whitman a torrential poet; he believes that Whitman was the first American poet with a total vision of his country, both the people and the landscape. He often quoted Whitman. For example, at the P.E.N. International Congress of 1966 in New York, he spoke of buying a copy of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in New York and read the first lines from Whitman's "Song of Exposition." He also used lines from "Starting from Paumanok" as an epigraph for his book *El hondero entusiasta* (*The Slinger-Enthusiast*). He discusses Whitman in several

interviews and essays. For example, in an interview with Robert Bly he said of Whitman, "He had tremendous eyes to see everything—he taught us to see things. He was our poet . . . We have loved him very much" (103). In an interview with Rita Guibert, Neruda stated that he believed that Whitman was the poet of the Industrial Revolution in the United States and states that he does not feel that his manner is like Whitman's but that his fundamental lesson is the same (97).<sup>2</sup> In *Confieso que he vivido* (*Memoirs*), he states that Whitman taught him to be himself and lauds Whitman for his writing about the Civil War. He also praises Whitman for Whitman's claims of being independent of schools and creeds.<sup>3</sup> Moreover in an essay, "*Inaugurando el Año de Shakespeare*" ("Shakespeare, Prince of Light"),<sup>4</sup> Neruda includes Whitman's name among the poets he most values: "En cada época, un bardo assume la totalidad de los sueños y de la sabiduría: expresa el crecimiento, la expansión del mundo. Se llama una vez Alighieri, o Victor Hugo, o Lope de Vega o Walt Whitman." ("In every epoch one bard assumes responsibility for the dreams and the wisdom of the age: he expresses the growth, the expansion, of that world. His name is Alighieri, Victor Hugo, Lope de Vega, Walt Whitman") (*Obras II* 1112).<sup>5</sup> A few lines after this quotation, he states that these men produce leaves under which others grow. He says, "Nos miran y nos ayudan a descubrirnos: nos revelan nuestro propio laberinto" ("They gaze on us and help us discover ourselves: they reveal to us our labyrinths") (1112). Also, he begins and ends his book *Incitación al Nixonicidio y Alabanza de la Revolución Chilena* (*A Call for the Destruction of Nixon and Praise for the Chilean Revolution*) by invoking Whitman. In the first poem he states:

Es por acción de amor a mi país  
que te reclamo, hermano necesario,



viejo Walt Whitman de la mano gris,  
para que con tu apoyo extraordinario  
verso a verso matemos de raíz  
a Nixon, presidente sanguinario. (1-6)

Because I love my country  
I claim you, essential brother,  
old Walt Whitman with your gray hands,

so that, with your special help  
line by line, we will tear out by the roots  
and destroy this bloodthirsty President Nixon.<sup>6</sup>

Besides his invocation of Whitman in this work, Neruda translated several of Whitman's poems, including *Song of Myself* (*Canto de mí mismo*) and "Salut au Monde" ("Saludo mundial").

From Neruda's earliest critics, passing mention has been made of his relation to Whitman. Critics like Leo Spitzer, Fernando Alegría, and Jaime Alazraki have tried to understand the relation between the two poets. For example, Fernando Alegría claims that Neruda is not a disciple of Whitman but someone who continues the work of Whitman like hereditary kin (317-318). Jaime Alazraki argues that Neruda is Whitman's voice in Latin America (41). He states, "Es difícil imaginar, hasta por un momento, la poesía de Neruda sin la constante presencia de Whitman" ("It is difficult to imagine, even for a moment, Neruda's poetry without the constant presence of Whitman") ("Neruda" 38). In his book *Poet-Chief: The American Poetics of Walt Whitman and Pablo Neruda*, comparing Whitman, Neruda, and Amerindian poetics, James Nolan claims that Whitman's most important influence on Neruda was inculcating a sense of being an American poet (15). Nolan's book is only the second study of serious length

on the topic, and in it Nolan presents a variety of comparisons between the poets, most having to do with their Americanness and their connection to Amerindian poetics.<sup>7</sup>

Whitman's key values as espoused in *Leaves of Grass* conditioned Neruda to be a poet and helped create his understanding of what a poet does. Neruda grew up intellectually on Whitman's work; the writings prepared him, along with many other influences, for his reaction to the stifling of freedoms for Spaniards and Chileans. Whitman's sense of embracing everyone, no matter what class, background, or race, convinced Neruda that Whitman was a poet of the people; moreover, Whitman's focus on democratic principles in *Leaves of Grass* was considered essential by Neruda when he wrote *Canto general*, which is not to say that he believed in democracy in the same way that Whitman did; on the contrary, he could not connect Whitman the poet with the U.S. capitalist practices that he saw spread throughout Latin America. Neruda's politics are similar to Whitman's in many ways, except that Neruda pushes Whitman's stress on democracy a step further to what he considers as pure democracy: communism. In his view communism would be the quintessential rule of the people by the people. It would embody a full expression of the people's will and needs. Much of the political content from Whitman's work shows up as well in Neruda's work; however, Neruda rejects liberal capitalism, a creed Whitman accepts. According to Neruda, capitalism with its technology will never lead to more freedom for the average person; rather, capitalism will continue the hierarchical structure of the old class system in a new form. It will also further the divide among countries; this problem appears in Neruda's discussions of the solitude of Latin America in relation to the major industrialized nations. Nevertheless, when Neruda turned to write an epic work that concerned the people and that would be

American, Whitman's lyric-epic was the obvious choice for study. The form was a new one for the Americas, marking it as a means to challenge Old World literary forms; plus, Whitman's politics and poetics had already influenced Neruda.

In terms of politics and literature, one major difference between Neruda and Whitman that affected *Leaves of Grass* and *Canto general* stems from the poets' activities in politics. When Whitman wrote *Leaves of Grass*, his primary periods of political activism had all but ceased. He continued to discuss politics, but he no longer campaigned or engaged in protest rallies. He assumed that American politics would be changed through the citizens' reading of his text. Neruda shares the view that poetic texts can change the political orientation of the people, for he sees a connection between the form of government and the literature. This idea is something that he gets from, among others, Whitman. Yet Neruda often states that there is no separation between politics, literature, and life; his own life bears out this belief since he was active in Chilean politics literally to his deathbed.

## II. Neruda's Political Life Before *Canto general*

Whitman was not the only influence on Neruda's politics or on his reason for writing a lyric-epic of the Americas. Whitman conditioned Neruda for politics, but the events of Neruda's life helped to determine his choice of communism. A brief look at his political life can prepare us to understand better his political worldview.

Neftalí Ricardo Reyes Basoalto (Pablo Neruda) was born July 12, 1904 in Parral, Chile, a region that is known for being harsh and poor. In August his mother died of tuberculosis. Neruda's father was a railroad worker who scolded the young poet for writing poetry, which is part of the reason the poet changed his name to Pablo Neruda,

taking the name from the Czechoslovakian poet Jan Neruda.<sup>8</sup> When he graduated from high school, he left for Santiago, where he intended to go to college to become a French teacher. Although his primary philosophy at this time resembled anarchism, he became involved in the Student Federation, a group of young political activists.<sup>9</sup> One of his most popular books in Latin America also came out in this period: *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* (*Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*), and on account of it Neruda was given a public office that many Chilean poets receive: a consular position.

After about a year as consul in Rangoon, he was appointed consul in Ceylon. Two years later, he was named the consul in Batavia. After a brief consular stint in Singapore, he returned to Chile in 1932. He could not support himself as a poet, so he took a position as a consul in Buenos Aires.<sup>10</sup> He did not remain long in Argentina since he was appointed consul in Barcelona in 1934 and soon after was named consul in Madrid. Neruda's years in Spain radically changed his poetry. First, he became friends with numerous poets who were also political radicals, such as Miguel Hernández and Rafael Alberti. These poets, along with others, taught him much about communism, which, considering the poverty of Chile and his working-class background, he readily accepted. Also, he became a close friend of Federico García Lorca. He gave talks on and with García Lorca—one that he notes in *Confieso que he vivido* (*Memoirs*) is on Rubén Darío. Of the war in Spain, he states, “empezó para mí la noche del 19 del Julio de 1936” (“it began for me on the night of July 19, 1936”) (*Confieso* 170). On this day Federico García Lorca was assassinated. Neruda notes that García Lorca's death made him ask, “Quién pudiera creer que hubiera sobre la tierra, y sobre *su tierra*,

monstruos capaces de un crimen tan inexplicable?” (“Who could believe that on earth, in his *own place*, there were monsters capable of such a crime?”) (124). Since Neruda had gained a reputation, his fellow poets were asking him to join in their fight against fascism in Spain, yet it was not until after García Lorca’s death that he took a serious look at Spanish politics. The scenes that he saw around him radically changed him; from being a poet primarily interested in melancholy and love, he shifted to the role of the poet as witness. Critics, both in his time and recently, have discussed extensively his shift to engaged poetry; some taking the view that part of his poetry became too infused with propaganda with the war poems. He responded to the criticism of his poetry in one of his poems, “Explico algunas cosas” (“I Will Explain Some Things”):

Preguntaréis por qué su poesía  
no nos habla del sueño, de las hojas,  
de los grandes volcanes de su país natal?

Venid a ver la sangre por las calles,  
venid a ver  
la sangre por las calles,  
venid a ver la sangre  
por las calles! (72-79)

You will ask: why doesn’t your poetry  
speak of sleep, of the leaves,  
of the great volcanoes of your native country?

Come to see the blood in the streets  
come to see  
the blood in the streets  
come to see the blood  
in the streets!

Neruda sees people dying, and like Anna Ahkmatova in *Requiem*, he feels compelled to write about these scenes. His compulsion is portrayed in the last stanza where he repeats the same words split onto different lines. Besides the repetition creating a

sense of the overwhelming nature of events, it also creates a sense of urgency. During this period Neruda began to see poetry as essential for the community and to consider poets who avoided conflict as letting down their responsibilities. This poem comes from his book *España en el corazón* (*Spain in the Heart*), which is a volume that signals his shift to *poésie engagée*.<sup>11</sup> He said of his experience in Spain, “Since then I have been convinced that it is the poet’s duty to take his stand along with the people in their struggle to transform society, betrayed into chaos by its rulers, into an orderly existence based upon political, social and economic democracy” (qtd. in Halperin 167).

During the war years in Spain, Neruda helped to create a center of resistance, and this activity brought him criticism of the Chilean government, which at the time wanted to stay neutral concerning Spain. He organized with writers, artists, and activists primarily in France, England, and Spain to argue against a fascist Spain. He helped organize conferences and edited collections dealing with Spain. For his activity, the conservative regime in Chile dismissed him from his post, and he returned to Chile in 1937.

Once in Chile, the conservative regime, the poverty of the people, and the desire to sing Chile opened in his mind the possibility for an epic work. He says of the period, “La idea de un poema central que agrupara las incidencias históricas, las condiciones geográficas, la vida y las luchas de nuestros pueblos, se me presentaba como una tarea urgente” (“The idea of a central poem that would bring together the historical incidents, the geographical conditions, the life and trials of our people, presented itself to me like an urgent task”) (*Confieso* 197). Maurice Halperin, Neruda’s friend, recalls Neruda telling him that he decided to write a native epic about Chile; Neruda told him:

It will have descriptive and lyric elements as well . . . and will attempt to reveal the deep process of historic transformation through which Chile has passed. I want to counter-balance the effect of the great poetry of the classics, such as Ercilla and Pedro de Oña. But I feel very humble in this task. To write for the people is too great an ambition. (168)

As Emir Rodríguez Monegal and other critics mention, Neruda began *Canto general* on the seventh of May in 1938, the day that his father died (236). He continued to work on the text for the next eleven years, yet much like *Leaves of Grass*, it was written in a state of political fury.

In 1938 a progressive party in Chile called the Popular Front gained power—their slogan was “pan, techo y abrigo” (bread, shelter, and clothing), and Neruda worked for them a few years before he was named consul general to Mexico in 1940. He held this post until 1943. In Mexico City he was surrounded by artists, such as Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco, who were also political activists. These friendships had an enormous impact on Neruda while he was writing what he then called *Canto general de Chile*, a preview of the work that would continue to grow into *Canto general*.<sup>12</sup> During this time he traveled around Latin America reading poems like “Canto de amor a Stalingrado” (“Love Song to Stalingrad”) and “Neuvo canto de amor a Stalingrado” (“New Love Song to Stalingrad”). In these poems he claims that he was born to sing of Stalingrad and of future progress that will exist with communism.

Due to disputes with the Chilean government, Neruda resigned his post in Mexico, and on a trip back to Chile from Mexico, he stopped as an honored guest in Peru, Colombia, and Panama. During his travels, he visited the ruins of Macchu Picchu near Cuzco in Peru. This visit is the experience upon which the most famous poem in *Canto general* is based: *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* (*The Heights of Macchu Picchu*).

John Felsteiner claims that the writing of the poem caused a change in Neruda's style. Felsteiner believes that with this poem Neruda summons the past into the present so that he can take up the role of the prophet for Latin America (190). In other words, this experience is central to fulfilling the task of *Canto general*.

Once Neruda returned to Chile, he read his poems and campaigned before hundreds of workers, and they responded by electing him to the Chilean senate on the Communist Party of Chile's ticket. A few months after his election in 1945, he officially joined the Communist Party, although his allegiance with the party was evident through his actions in the preceding years. In 1946 Gabriel González Videla, a figure who looms large in *Canto general*, asked Neruda to help him win the presidency, and Neruda agreed. As campaign manager, he traveled throughout Chile to support González Videla. Soon after González Videla was elected, he turned against the communists in the country. By this time Neruda had been a senator for two years and felt that his poetry was being harmed for lack of practice, so he applied for a leave of absence, and the Communist Party of Chile granted it in the summer of 1947 to allow him to finish *Canto general*. He was not able to complete the work during this period because he was compelled back to duty by Chile's break with the communist nations. He lamented this fact as well as the dismissal of the Communist Party ministers from González Videla's administration. To argue against these actions, he published a piece called "Discursos y documentos sobre la crisis democrática en Chile" ("Discourses on The Crisis of Democracy in Chile") in *El Nacional* of Caracas. In this piece he laments the repressive measures of the current regime. He criticizes officials for censoring the press, for hurting the laboring classes, for Videla's abandonment of his platform, and for



his alignment with North American business and political interests. Because of this discourse and his commitment to the Communist Party, Neruda was impeached in 1948. On the senate floor he delivered a speech entitled “Yo acuso” (“I Accuse”), in which he lambasted the current government for violence, corruption, and incompetence. A month after his speech, the judicial system ordered his arrest, and he went into hiding. These turbulent times surround the writing of *Canto general* and are mentioned in the last poem of the work:

Este libro termina aquí. Ha nacido  
de la ira como una brasa, como los territorios  
de bosques incendiados, y deseo  
que continúe como un árbol rojo  
propagando su clara quemadura. (1-5)

The book ends here. It was born  
of fury like a live coal, like territories  
of burned forest, and I hope  
that it continues like a red tree  
propagating its transparent burn.<sup>13</sup>

For almost a year Neruda was in hiding in Chile. Various people allowed him to stay at their homes while the Communist Party was trying to arrange for his escape; many poor families shared what little they had with him because they imagined him a friend. In their houses he worked on *Canto general*. His fugitive predicament works its way into the lyric-epic in the section *El fugitivo* (*The Fugitive*). He escaped Chile and a year later went to Mexico to see the first edition of *Canto general* published along with sketches from Rivera and Siqueiros.

Neruda remained active in politics for the rest of his life, traveling around the world in support of his political ideas; he was even a Chilean presidential candidate for a brief period; however, he gave up his candidacy in favor of Salvador Allende's

campaign. In fact, he died in 1973 after being handled roughly just after General Pinochet's overthrow of Allende's socialist government. Yet, his active life after *Canto general* does not concern the present study, for only his early activities affect the book. In *Canto general* Neruda mixes his personal experiences with the experience of Latin Americans.

### III. Neruda's Politics

Whitman's work and his historical situation influenced Neruda's politics more markedly than any other literary figure primarily because Neruda's vision of politics is one gleaned from practice in the field. He is not a great theorist of communism. Essentially, communism for him was a reaction to the treatment of the people he grew up with and the people he met in Spain. In his writings he seldom mentions major communist thinkers, such as Marx and Trotsky; rather, he stresses the importance of the people and reiterates the need for the basic amenities of life: food and shelter. Many of his specific views on the Chilean government emerge from his period of being a senator; however, they do not provide much of a theoretical picture of what he envisions as the actual structure for a communist government. He focuses primarily on maintaining workers' positions and their rights, protecting freedom of speech and opinion, nationalizing energy corporations, regulating rent, and providing equal political rights for women. He often praises countries that have become communist, such as the U.S.S.R.<sup>14</sup> In general Neruda's version of communism developed from those around him, from his friends and from those who pushed him into party politics, yet communism was an obvious choice for him since he viewed the version of democracy as touted by the United States as intimately connected with the capitalist system that he believed

was working to keep Latin America in poverty. Some of the evils he sees in the spread of capitalism from North America are evident in his poem “La herencia” (“Inheritance”) from *Incitación al Nixonicidio y alabanza de la revolución chilena* through his portrayal of Nixon’s governing style:

Así Nixon comanda con napalm:  
así destruye razas y naciones:  
así gobierna el triste Tío Same;

con asesinos desde sus aviones,  
o con dólares verdes que reparte  
entre politijarpas y ladrones. (1-6)

This is how Nixon commands with napalm:  
This is how he destroys races and nations:  
This is how sad Uncle Sam governs;

with assassins from his airplanes,  
or with green dollars given out to  
political agents and thieves.

Communism was Neruda’s option for combating the spread of capitalism, the effect of which he saw on the salt and mineral mines of Chile. Perhaps his close view of actual conditions in Chile provided him with an insight into the failure of the prevailing government, but perhaps his view of the people’s agony pushed him towards an idealistic form of government, which frequently happens in romantic politics, of which Neruda is a clear descendant.

#### IV. The Poet in Society

Neruda’s politics, influenced by his political life and Whitman’s ideas, determined his conception of the role of poetry in society. Unlike Whitman, Neruda felt that there was an American literature already in existence, even if that literature was primarily governed by Europe. He often spoke of Latin America as founded by Ercilla. For him

Latin America was created out of a poetic myth, yet even though he knew that there was a tradition in existence, he felt that it needed to be reformed to allow for a native experience of the Americas. In creating a new, native myth for Latin Americans, Neruda hoped to change the way Latin Americans thought of themselves. This idea already shows some similarity with Whitman's ideas on the role of poetry in society. For Latin America to be created out of poetry, poetry has to affect its readers. For Neruda, literature conditions the reality of the people. That Neruda envisions an engaged poetry is not surprising considering that writers in Latin America tend to be more politicized than North American writers. Jorge Andrade states that this engaged stance is due to the fact that Latin American poetry rests on social ideals while the poetry of the United States relies on the individual (37). Whether or not Andrade's statement is valid, Neruda's later work is more concerned with political and social issues than the subconscious; however, even in his most political works, he often retains the poetic "I" as the speaker for himself. While Ercilla had started to create a myth for the people, that mythic structure was incomplete and contained relics of the class system, so Neruda tries to create a new myth. This was a major reason behind Neruda's choice of the epic as a vehicle for his work. With the epic he hoped to create a foundational myth for Latin America; moreover, the epic was an obvious choice due to his desire to rewrite the history of Latin America through poetry.

More than being a mythmaker, the poet for Neruda functions as a witness. This aspect of the poet's relation to society shows up briefly in several of Whitman's works, but the role of witness is more pronounced for Neruda. It is in the role of witness that Neruda was originally politicized. After Spain, he felt compelled to speak out about the

horrors that he saw. His trips through Latin America after Spain just intensified his need to bear witness. In fact much of *Canto general* acts as a witness to horrific actions perpetrated on Latin Americans, and it is through the role of witness that Neruda attempts to redeem these acts. For Neruda, the poet must take up the role of witness at desperate times. This vision of poetry appears in an *ars poetica* from *Canto general*, “Las poetas celestes” (“Celestial Poets”):

Qué hicisteis vosostros, gidistas  
intelectualistas, rilkistas,  
misterizantes, falsos brujos  
existenciales, amapolas  
surrealistas encendidas  
en una tumba europeizados  
cadáveres de la moda,  
pálidas lombrices del queso  
capitalista, qué hicisteis  
ante el reinado de la angustia,  
frente a este oscuro ser humano,  
a esta pateada compostura,  
a esta cabeza sumerigida  
en el estiércol, a esta esencia  
de ásperas vidas pisoteadas?

No hicisteis nada sino la fuga:  
vendisteis hacinado detritus,  
buscasteis cabellos celestes,  
plantas cobardes, uñas rotas,  
“Belleza pura”, “sortilegio”,  
obras de pobres asustados  
para evadir los ojos, para  
enmarañar las delicadas  
pupilas, para subsistir  
con el plato de restos sucios  
que os arrojaron los señores,  
sin ver la piedra en agonía,  
sin defender, sin conquistar,  
más ciegos que las coronas  
del cementerio, cuando cae  
la lluvia sobre las inmóviles  
flores podridas de las tumbas. (1-32)

What did you do, Gidists,  
intellectualists, Rilkists,  
mistificators, false existentialist  
sorcerers, surrealist  
butterflies burning  
in a tomb, Europeanized  
cadavers of fashion,  
pale worms of capitalist  
cheese, what did you do  
in the presence of the reign of anguish,  
in the face of this obscure human being,  
this trampled composure,  
this head submerged  
in manure, this essence of harsh downtrodden lives?

You did nothing but flee:  
you sold heaped detritus,  
pursued celestial hair,  
cowardly plants, broken fingernails,  
“pure Beauty,” “sortilege,”  
works of the fainthearted  
designed to avert the eyes,  
to entangle delicate  
pupils, to subsist  
on a plate of filthy leftovers  
thrown to you by the gentlemen,  
without seeing the stone in agony,  
without defending, without conquering,  
blinder than wreaths  
in the graveyard, when rain  
falls on the tombs’  
motionless decomposed flowers.

Neruda’s experience in Spain politicized him and pushed him away from his early surrealist writings. His mention of “gidistas” and “rilkistas” is his way of poking fun at poets with romantic tendencies and himself. In terms of his own writing, this sarcasm acts as a palinode in which he says farewell to his past poetry. In this poem he critiques poets who do not turn to witness and rebellion when faced with the horrors of tyrannical action. Like Muriel Rukeyser in her *Life of Poetry*, he believes that poetry *is* life and the defense of life. If a poet fails to defend life, he or she is dead to poetry, thus, the

mention of cadavers, tombs, and wreaths. These images also play off of Romantic poets and artists' fascination with death as portrayed through graveyards and/or corpses. By avoiding the anguish of life, intellectual poets, as Neruda suggests, resign themselves to the places of the dead. Along with this allegation, Neruda suggests that intellectual poets are part of the capitalist system if they do not speak out against tyranny. He insinuates that intellectual poets can be bought for a price and that their lack of witness results from their averted eyes; their silence shows their support. For Neruda, the act of witnessing is connected with the act of defending and even rebelling. In fact, in an article entitled "Poetry is Rebellion," he states:

Perhaps the duties of the poet have been the same throughout history. Poetry was honored to go out into the streets, to take part in combat after combat. . . . Poetry is rebellion. The poet is not offended if he is called subversive. Life is more important than societal structures. (*Passions* 349)

These lines, especially "Poetry is Rebellion," sound similar to the writings of Whitman, and perhaps it is no small detail that in the paragraph following this one, Neruda quotes lines from Whitman's work. In acting as witness and as catalyst for rebellion, poetry, according to Neruda, acts as a guide. It also functions to make the people one, which Neruda suggests is a goal of poetry, as he states, "It will unite them, and it will flow among them, founding peoples" (*Passions* 336). Poetry thus for Neruda leads people and helps unite them; it also acts as a way to found communities.

This point brings up another issue that Neruda sees as crucial to the poet. While writing most of his later poetry, Neruda stresses that language should arise from the people and the land, that it should fit its subject. He states in "Sobre una Poesía sin Pureza" ("Some Thoughts on Impure Poetry"), "Así sea la poesía que buscamos,

gastada como por un ácido por los deberes de la mano, penetrada por el sudor y el humo, oliente a orina y a azucena salpicada por las diversas profesiones” (“This is the poetry that we are seeking, corroded, as if by acid, by the labors of man’s hands, pervaded by sweat and smoke, reeking of urine and of lilies soiled by diverse professions”) (1040). Again in “Poets of the People” he states, “I have always wanted the hands of the people to be seen in poetry” (*Passions* 138). In ways like Whitman’s organic theory, Neruda desires an organic poetry that has grown out of the people. Such a poetry will capture the people but will also be of the people. In other words, the poetry will be appropriate to a communist society in that it will be primarily about working people. Instead of traces of class hierarchies, Neruda believes that such a poetry will contain the traces of people; thus, the poetry will be the seed from which a communist society will spring and through which it will be nourished. This type of poetry will of necessity stress clarity.

Many of Neruda’s basic ideas about poetry can be seen in *Canto general* and help explain why he decided to write the work. For example, his stress on mythmaking is important to the project. He claims that each culture creates its own myths and that the artists are responsible for those myths. He understands myths primarily as stories through which a culture presents images of itself to itself and to others. Creating myths includes naming places for one’s culture and filling those places with story, as Neruda states, “Necesitamos colmar de palabras los confines de un continente mudo y nos embriaga esta tarea de fabular y de nombrar” (“We must fill with words the distant places in a silent continent and we are intoxicated by this task of making fables and giving names”) (“Hacia la ciudad espléndida” [“Toward the Splendid City”] 27).



Neruda's emphasis on names shows the influence of Whitman, who also stresses new names for America. Through naming, Neruda wanted to create an American culture in Latin America that differed from that left by colonization.<sup>15</sup> Through naming and creating myths, Neruda wanted, to use Whitman's phrase, to publish Latin America to the world. He addresses this issue in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech by discussing the solitude of Latin America in relation to the first world nations. Creating a new Latin American literature would help Latin Americans see themselves as connected and would make the world conceive of Latin America as more than a realm of dictators and poverty.

This goal is a prime reason that Neruda chose the lyric-epic. Through the lyric-epic, Neruda hoped to raise the historical consciousness of his readers by introducing Amerindian history and contemporary Latin American history. In the pages of his poem, he could also reread history into a format that he believes is suitable to the future progress of the Americas. The epic provides a genre which Neruda believes works for foundational stories about a culture. This foundational aspect of the epic is important for Neruda because, besides wanting the work to publish the people, he wants *Canto general* to join the people together. If Latin Americans were ever going to band together under communism to create a better society, he believed they first must feel united as a people. In creating a foundational work, Neruda attempted to foster a sense of common progress in individual peoples and in Latin America as a whole.

His idea of creating a historical consciousness of progress shows similarities with Whitman's ideas; moreover, it reveals that, like Whitman, he wants to change the basic consciousness of his readers and believes he can with poetry.<sup>16</sup> Through *Canto*

*general*, Neruda intended to foster communism among the people of Latin America. Like Trotsky, as the epigraph to this chapter shows, Neruda wants to create a communist consciousness among the people so that communism will be sustainable. Following Whitman, he assumes that this consciousness can be fostered through literature, specifically through a lyric-epic. Communism will not work without the people having a communist consciousness, and Neruda believes that such a consciousness—he would call it the myth of the people—is created largely through literature. By creating such a communist consciousness, he believes that writers can affect the future of Latin America. He expresses this idea in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: “Uno de mis cantos aspiró a servir en el espacio como signo de reunión donde se cruzaron los caminos, o como fragmento de piedra o de Madera en que alguien, otros, los que vendrán, pudieran depositar los nuevos signos” (“Each of my songs aspires to serve in space as a sign for a meeting where paths cross one another, or as a fragment of stone or Madera on which someone, others, those who will come, will be able to leave new signs”) (28). His poetry is intended as a meeting place and much more. Like Whitman, he is confident his work will act as a new departure point for Latin American literature and for the people.<sup>17</sup>

The last important reason for Neruda writing *Canto general* is the poem's role of witness. In Neruda's speech at his impeachment hearing from the Senate, he forewarns President González Videla that he might “find it necessary to refer to his conduct in the vast poem entitled *Canto general de Chile* which I am presently writing, singing of our land and the episodes that formed it” (*Passions* 305). Neruda's work expanded from *Canto general de Chile* to *Canto general* because Neruda experienced

the harsh conditions of much of Latin America during his travels before and during writing. He felt compelled to bear witness to what he saw. Many of the poems in *Canto general* concern specific events and people, and in many sections, especially *La arena traicionada* (*The Sand Betrayed*), the poet acts as witness to the people and to events. For example, in “Las masacres” (“The Massacres”), which is about a massacre in Chile in 1946, the speaker states:

Nadie sabe dónde enterraron  
los asesinos estos cuerpos,  
pero ellos saldrán de la tierra  
a cobrar la sangre caída  
en la resurrección del pueblo. (28-32)

Nobody knows where the assassins  
buried these bodies,  
but they'll rise from the earth  
to redeem the fallen blood  
in the resurrection of the people.

In the poem prior to this passage, the speaker presents the massacre of the people. Here he reminds the reader of their presence, suggesting that even though no one knows where they are buried, the people will be remembered. He also suggests that the dead will rise up when all the people rise up. The resurrection that he mentions here is the advent of a communist society. Neruda often connects images of the people, nature, and communism. Just as Whitman presents democracy as natural, so too does Neruda present communism as natural. Moreover, in his role of witness he attempts to redeem the past afflictions of Latin Americans and point the way to the future. Even though progress towards communism is natural, that progress must be fought for, and many people will die along the way who will be redeemed in the founding of communist governments.<sup>18</sup> The goal of redemption through witnessing is a goal of

*Canto general*, as is Neruda's attempt to present images of Latin American violence along with the wonders of communism to convince Latin Americans that their future rests with communist governments.

## V. Structure

The basic structure of *Canto general* is complicated. Several critics split the basic structure in two, stating that the work starts with the historical and moves to the personal; in this vein some suggest that the work starts with the epic and moves to the lyric or that it starts with the narrative and moves to the personal or that the political is first and then the personal.<sup>19</sup> In a broad view their simplifications have merit, and it is true that personal elements do become more prominent in the latter half of the work, yet personal elements exist throughout the work, as Rodríguez Monegal recognizes (*El viajero inmóvil* 246). Throughout the poem, Neruda introduces his persona as part of the action of history, as a chronicler or re-interpreter. In the latter half of the book, he deals with contemporary events so that he acts as witness to events that he has experienced.

The basic structure of *Canto general* is as follows. Neruda starts off with a new beginning. In one sense, the beginning of the work is Latin America prior to contact with Europe; in another sense, as many critics have noted, it is a new genesis.<sup>20</sup> The poem starts in unnamed places and tells that human beings are dust and earth. It moves quickly through poems which introduce the vegetation, the birds, the animals, the rivers, the minerals, and the people of Latin America. Next, Neruda turns to what has become the most famous poem in *Canto general*, *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* (*Heights of Macchu Picchu*). This poem describes the poet's response to a trip to Macchu Picchu, a

historical site near Cuzco in Peru. In this poem, Neruda presents the lost peoples of the Americas and shows how, as Felsteiner suggests, memory redeems time (41). Also in this poem, he takes on the mantle of a poet of the people. Macchu Picchu and its silent history become his muse. After establishing Latin American genesis and his appropriate position as the Latin American poet, Neruda turns to a section called *Los conquistadores* (*The Conquistadors*) to explain the history of colonization of Latin America. Next, he presents a section on the liberators of Latin America. This section includes men like O'Higgins, who was important to the liberation of Chile, but also Amerindian leaders like Lautaro of the Auracanian and Tupac Amaru of the Incas. After discussing the liberators, Neruda concentrates on Latin American leaders who have betrayed the people. The next sections, VI through IX, are filled with portrayals of the history of violence in Latin America along with the beauties of the land and the people. For example, in one of these sections, *La tierra se llama Juan* (*The Earth's Name is Juan*), Neruda assumes the voices of various people to provide witness to their struggles. In the next sections, *El fugitivo* (*The Fugitive*) and *Las flores de Punitaqui* (*The Flowers of Punitaqui*), Neruda tells the story of his fleeing Chile and his love for the people and landscape of Latin America. These sections primarily deal with his personal experience, but in praising the way that the people take him in, he shows what he believes is the basis for the future communist society. In section XII he celebrates his fallen fellow poets, such as Rafael Alberti and Miguel Hernández, and in the last sections Neruda switches to celebrating the landscape and aspects of his life. For example, *El gran océano* (*The Great Ocean*) provides what Durán and Safir call a "mythology of the Pacific" (102). Neruda discusses the ocean at times as a

representation of Being or of the people. In the last section, *Yo soy (I Am)*, Neruda writes a loose autobiography that begins in 1904 and works up to the present day. Like Whitman's poem "So Long," which provides the reader with a farewell, Neruda's poem "Termino aquí" ("I end here") acts to close the work and sum up the project. To sum up the basic narrative, it moves from genesis to conquest to liberation to betrayal to the need for communism in Latin America.

*Canto general* builds from the ancient past, through colonization and the problems of contemporary Latin America, to point to the bright future of communism in Latin America. The violence of history that Neruda evokes has often been taken as a central theme of the work. For example, Roberto González Echevarría views betrayal as central to the story of *Canto general* (9). Granted that betrayal, like violence, is prominent throughout the work, betrayal is used to build up to the future hope of communism. In his unmistakable message, the people must work through the betrayal and violence that surrounds them to something better, which in Neruda's view is communism. This future-oriented aspect of the work diverges significantly from what many critics often point out about other Latin American literature, i.e. that Latin American writers are concerned with the past while North American writers are concerned with the future.<sup>21</sup> While this generalization may be applicable to writers like García Márquez and Borges, the same cannot be said of Neruda. Following Whitman, Neruda wrote a book with the intent of influencing Latin Americans to create a certain type of future. Neruda aims his work towards the future because he believes that it will help inspire contemporary people to work towards such a future.

The form that Neruda chose is similar to that of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Both works are lyric-epics, as critics like Manuel Durán and Margery Safir note (103), and Neruda picked up this form from Whitman. One primary difference between their versions is that Neruda uses the shifting persona that Whitman creates to speak through other voices. Whitman often claims to be speaking for others, but he does not conjure up other individual personas; Neruda does. However, when Neruda presents the persona of another individual, that individual appears connected with Neruda the poet, so in many ways even though the reader meets an individual, that individual is still related to the collective that is at the base of *Canto general*. In Neruda's work, we become involved with individuals who are important on their own, but the overall impression is that history is working towards a collective that will value the individual. For Neruda, Whitman's pure democracy can easily be read as a precursor to communist thought; moreover, Whitman's influence on Neruda is clear, especially on certain poems like *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* and on the structure of the work.<sup>22</sup>

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is a great idea to try to form of all the New World a nation that with a single tie bonds its parts between itself and the whole.

<sup>2</sup> It could be argued that Neruda's idea of Whitman came from his poetry and from the mythic image of Whitman that was circulating in Latin America in this period. See Leandro Wolfson's "The Other Whitman in Spanish America" for a discussion of the myth of Whitman in Latin America.

<sup>3</sup> At times Neruda is fond of arguing a similar freedom from creeds for himself. In Whitman's case the claim is rhetorical, while in Neruda's case that is not always clear.

<sup>4</sup> This title is the usual English translation. A more literal translation would be "Inaugurating the Year of Shakespeare."

<sup>5</sup> English translation for the prose come from, unless otherwise noted, Peden's *Passions and Impressions*.

<sup>6</sup> This English translation comes from Teresa Anderson's translation of the book.

<sup>7</sup> Nolan does mention that the young Neruda was also highly influenced by Carlos Sabat Erasty and Gabriela Mistral and that since both of these poets were influenced heavily by Whitman that Neruda received the influence of Whitman both through his writings and through other writers (26).

<sup>8</sup> During his years in school, his poetry caught the eye of the principal of a girls' school, the poet Gabriela Mistral, who eventually would win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Mistral gave Neruda books and provided him the support that he did not receive among his friends or his family. In his *Confieso que he vivido (Memoirs)*, he notes that she introduced him to Russian writing, especially to Dostoevsky and Chekhov.

<sup>9</sup> Several of his early poems were published in the Student Federation's journal *Claridad*.

<sup>10</sup> He disliked his job and his marriage, and perhaps the best thing to emerge from his time in Argentina was his friendship with the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca.

<sup>11</sup> In *Confieso que he vivido (Memoirs)*, he discusses his pride that this book was printed by soldiers near the front in Spain and was carried by soldiers in the war. Like Whitman, Neruda wanted his poetry to be read by common people; however, unlike Whitman's works Neruda's works often gained a popular audience. In his later years, he read his poetry to large crowds of working-class people in the fields of Chile.

<sup>12</sup> Many critics have written on the influence of the Mexican muralists on Neruda's *Canto general*. Essentially, Neruda discussed with them their creation of myth and their glorification of Amerindians and decided to incorporate many of these elements into his work.

<sup>13</sup> All translations of *Canto general*, unless otherwise noted, come from Jack Schmitt's version.

<sup>14</sup> His songs in praise of Stalin were written before there was much news of Stalin's actions. What little violence Neruda knew of Stalin at first he dismisses as necessary for the good of the country.

<sup>15</sup> I do not intend to suggest that Neruda wanted a separate tradition of American writing; rather, he wanted a tradition that recognized Native American elements. He wanted to retain many elements of European culture, especially its literature, but he wanted that tradition shifted to suit the Americas.



<sup>16</sup> Whitman is not his only source for the idea of historical progress. Many Marxist thinkers have posited similar ideas.

<sup>17</sup> Many contemporary writers and critics view Neruda in this position as a new starting point for Latin American literature. Julio Cortazar stated that Neruda “tore us away from vague notions of European muses and mistresses” (qtd. in Felsteiner 58).

<sup>18</sup> Neruda often skirts the issue of the potential violence of a revolution. His choice of avoiding the issue could be rhetorical, i.e. he does not want to scare the reader with visions of violence, or his silence could signify that he has not come to a stance on the issue himself.

<sup>19</sup> See René de Costa’s *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*.

<sup>20</sup> See de Costa page 112. A major topic of critical discussion around Neruda’s *Canto general* is its reliance on and use of biblical themes and its use of prophetic voices.

<sup>21</sup> See Valenzuela’s *Latin America: Notes & Essays*.

<sup>22</sup> Neruda often evokes Whitman in the capacity of an almost communist thinker. Others, such as Darío, make similar statements.

## Chapter 7: Camaraderie, Unity, Communism in *Canto general*

Sube a nacer conmigo, hermano.<sup>1</sup>

Neruda (*Obras* / 347)

As in *Leaves of Grass*, camaraderie is a central idea of *Canto general*. In the case of a communist writer, such a devotion to camaraderie is not surprising. However, Neruda's work is not a celebration of what comrades can do, as many social realist works of the early Soviet Union were, nor is it a work in praise of comrades in general. Neruda's essential project in *Canto general* is building camaraderie among the peoples of Latin America. He provides a myth for Latin America to pull Latin Americans away from what he calls their solitude or lack of connection. In essence, he reveals the people to the people. Under capitalism Neruda believes the individual and nature are subjugated to the needs of the capitalist system.<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, Neruda showcases the individual by focusing on the people and what they have gone through. He holds up camaraderie as the only possible way to freedom. The people's unity is the key element in allowing them to escape tyrannical rulers and the "holy Western culture."<sup>3</sup> Once the people are unified and live without class barriers, then they will be able to implement a pure democracy guided by human need.

In this chapter the study explores what camaraderie means to Neruda and what it implies, and then it looks at how Neruda tries to teach his readers that camaraderie is an ideal to be valued and put in place, a lesson that he teaches by connecting camaraderie with nature. He shows how it is natural to band together in unity. Moreover, he shows how the people have been betrayed in the past and presents unity as the principle that will keep them from being betrayed in the future. He also displays the encroaching imperialism of North America in Latin America as a threat that can be

confronted only through unity. Ultimately, he presents these ideas in order to convince Latin Americans to unite under communism; he wants his work to be the seed from which communism grows. In this sense, he attempts to create a political sourcebook similar to *Leaves of Grass*.

In attempting to call the people together, Neruda has a different project than Whitman had. For Whitman, a democracy was already in place; thus, Whitman primarily wants to see that the democracy retains its pure elements, so he creates a democratic personality paradigm. Neruda knew Whitman's ideas of creating a governmental culture; however, Neruda needed his poetry first to instigate a communist change in the government. After the change, he hoped that the primary ideas in *Canto general* would help to create a communist culture. While Whitman stresses camaraderie in the abstract as love for one's fellow citizens, Neruda often expresses his ideas of camaraderie through practical needs. For example, one leitmotif in the work is bread.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, unlike Whitman who is motivated by the fear of governmental failure, Neruda is galvanized by seeing the suffering of those around him. His politicization occurred primarily after his experience in Spain where the sight of human misery forced him to connect poetry and politics. It is this connection that he brought back to Chile.

As with Whitman, Neruda believes camaraderie levels social or political hierarchies that are rooted in European colonization. When people feel brotherly love towards one another, they form a loose federation on account of their concern for one another. Ideally, such people will pattern their actions with regard to each others' benefits. Moreover, since they desire freedom for themselves, they will desire freedom for their fellow comrades as well. For Neruda, once the social and political hierarchies

are overthrown, people will coexist in relative freedom and awareness of each others' needs. Ideally, with a sense of camaraderie, people will treat each other as human beings and will look out for the basic needs of one another. No one should be deprived of food, clothing, or shelter or be treated as animal giving life to bolster the system of capitalism in North America, Europe, or wherever. This sense of camaraderie also helps agitate the people into a state of revolt; the people will look at their own state and the state of their comrades, and then they will work to overthrow the current governmental system in favor of a communist system, which would be their own since they were in charge of the takeover. While this idea sounds good in theory, in practice such a dream often fails to get turned into reality.

#### I. Singing the Comrade

Neruda's claim to be the poet of the people is fundamental to the meaning of *Canto general* and to camaraderie, for as the people's poet he is a comrade and thus able to sing about camaraderie. He makes this claim near the beginning of the work in *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* (*The Heights of Macchu Picchu*).<sup>5</sup> This section occurs just after the introductory parts and splits up the historical account of the *Canto general*. In the first section of *Canto general*, *La lámpara en la tierra* (*A Lamp on Earth*), the reader is led to the time of creation in Latin America. Then, with *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, the poet explores the ruins of the Incan city of Macchu Picchu in Peru.<sup>6</sup> Just after this section, the historical narrative provides a brief account of Latin American history from the conquest until the present day, so *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* functions as a shift to modern times and also as a hiatus in the narrative progression of the work. This section functions as does the invocation of traditional epics in that in it Neruda lays claim to his

material. In *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, Neruda explores his sources of inspiration and the necessity of writing *Canto general*, and its placement is similar to Whitman's placement of *Song of Myself* in *Leaves of Grass*, which also lays claim to the material of the poem; moreover, both works have several goals in common, such as exploring the identity of the speaker and presenting a rationale for the work as a whole.

In 1943 Neruda visited the Incan ruins of Macchu Picchu, a place that is central to the geography of *Canto general*. He describes his trip in *Confieso que he vivido* (*Memoir*):

Ascendimos a caballo. Por entonces no había carretera. Desde lo alto vi las antiguas construcciones de piedra rodeados por las altísimas cumbres de los Andes Verdes. Desde la ciudadela carcomida y roída por el paso de los siglos se despeñaban torrentes. Masas de neblina blanca se levantaban desde el río Wilcamayo. Me sentí infinitamente pequeño en el centro de aquel ombligo de piedra; ombligo de un mundo deshabitado, orgulloso y eminente, al que de algún modo yo pertenecía. Sentí que mis propias manos habían trabajado allí en alguna etapa lejana, cavando surcos, alisando peñascos.

Me sentí chileno, peruano, americano. Había encontrado en aquellas alturas difíciles, entre aquellas ruinas gloriosas u dispersas, una profesión de fe para la continuación de mi canto.

Allí nació mi poema *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*. (235)

We ascended on horseback for there was no highway. At top I saw the ancient stone constructions surrounded by the tall peaks of the green Andes. From the citadel torn away and weathered by centuries, torrents descended. In masses white fog came from the Wilkamayu River. I felt infinitely small in the center of that navel of rocks, the navel of an uninhabited world, proud and lofty, to which I in some way belonged. I felt that my own hands had worked there at some far point in time, digging furrows, polishing the rocks.

I felt Chilean, Peruvian, American. I had found on those difficult heights, among those glorious dispersed ruins, the profession of faith I needed to continue my poetry.

My poem *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* was born there.

Among the remarkable ruins, he feels connected to the people who worked there in the past and to Latin Americans as a whole. His role as the poet to call together Latin

Americans becomes clear to him, which is a role he takes on in the poem. He portrays himself as a central figure who allows the reader to see the shared struggles of common Latin Americans; he pulls us into a vision of camaraderie. *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* launches the argument for camaraderie and unity that Neruda uses to bolster communism; and examining it in detail can aid in understanding Neruda's conception of camaraderie.

Section one of *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* begins in an in-between time:

Del aire al aire, como una red vacía,  
iba yo entre las calles y la atmósfera, llegando y despidiendo,  
en el advenimiento del otoño la moneda extendida  
de las hojas, y entre la primavera y la espigas. (1, 1-4)

From air to air, like an empty net  
I went between the streets and atmosphere, arriving and departing,  
in the advent of autumn the outstretched coin  
of the leaves, and between springtime and the ears of corn.

In the beginning, the poet searches for something which he later specifies as a stable human essence, but here he does not understand completely what he is looking for and so goes wandering in-between things. As these lines correspond to that point in *Canto general* where language is introduced into the story, this passage forms an in-between point between pre-language and language.<sup>7</sup> Ernesto Grassi's comments on Neruda's use of language are appropriate for this section, for Grassi argues that Neruda follows Heidegger in arguing that language reveals being and that historical eras are announced through poetic means (253). The poet is in an in-between state at the moment that language is introduced into the history of Latin America.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, this section of the poem is like the traditional epic invocation except for the major difference that there is no divinity asked to inspire the poet. The poet ultimately gets his inspiration

from the presence of the past in the ruins of Macchu Picchu. Average people from the past mixed with the present-day problems of the common people provide him with the inspiration to write this work. Moreover, the lack of a divinity accounts for the epic invocation in the second section. In the first section, *La lámpara en la tierra*, we are witness to Latin American genesis, but no god is present. Few human beings are there either, and those who are present are without language. The first reference to language in the work comes from the poet exploring how and why he can and must sing *Canto general*. In other words, Neruda presents language as essential to human functioning in history, but even more, he prepares the reader to view Latin American history as seen through the language of the poet. In this section, he presents language as necessary in order to move from circular history to history as progressive. Before language, human beings are living with nature. After language, the process of history as recorded progression begins. Language names history, creates it, and allows it to begin; however, language is not specifically what the poet is looking for in this first section. Describing himself in an in-between state, he spirals down in Dantesque fashion into another world, except that the world he is descending to is the past:

Puse la frente entre las olas profundas,  
descendí como gota entre la paz sulfúrica,  
y, como un ciego, regresé al jazmín  
de las gastada primavera humana. (1, 20-23)

I put my brow amid the deep waves,  
descended like a drop amid the sulphurous peace,  
and, like a blind man, returned to the jasmine  
of the spent human springtime.<sup>9</sup>

In section two, the speaker states that he is looking for the eternal trace of human beings among the stones. Do human beings have any permanence?, he asks

himself, but he has no answer, yet he spies the seeds of flowers captured in stone and wonders about the seed of human beings. He sees:

No tuve sitio donde descansar la mano,  
y que, corriente como agua manantial encadenado,  
o firme como grumo de antracita o cristal,  
hubiera devuelto el calor o el frío de mi mano extendida.  
Qué era el hombre? En qué parte de su conversación abierta  
entre los almacenes y los silbidos, en cuál de sus movimientos metálicos  
vivía lo indestructible, lo imperecedero, la vida? (2, 37-43)

I had no place to rest my hand,  
which, fluid like the water or an impounded spring  
or firm as a chunk of anthracite or crystal,  
would have returned the warmth or cold of my outstretched hand.  
What was man? In what part of his conversation begun  
amid shops and whistles, in which of his metallic movements  
live the indestructible, the imperishable, life?

He sees traces of nature in the landscape and traces of human activity in built materials, but he does not find the essence of life. Running up against the Heraclitean flux, he asks for something stable and only finds change.

In section three, with language reminiscent of Thoreau or Whitman, he describes the daily deaths that he sees in the people around him and in the people of the past:

El ser como el maíz es desgranaba en el inacabable  
granero de los hechos perdidos, de los acontecimientos  
miserables, del uno al siete, al ocho,  
y no una muerte, sino muchas muertes llegaba a cada uno:  
cada día una muerte pequeña  
.....  
todos desfallecieron esperando su muerte, su corta muerte diaria:  
y su quebranto aciago de cada día era  
como una copa negra que bebían temblando. (3, 1-51)

Like corn man was husked in the bottomless  
granary of forgotten deeds, the miserable course of  
events, from one to seven, to eight,  
and not one death but many deaths came to each:  
every day a little death  
.....



all were consumed awaiting their death, their daily ration of death:  
and the ominous adversity of each day was like  
a black glass from which they drank trembling.

Husked like the material they are working with, like the capitalist mill, the workers of the past are built by deeds as they work towards death. The only trace of them lies in the works that they have fabricated. Neruda's focus on the past workers connects them to the present workers, which is a central reason for looking at them. The ruins give him an insight on the past and the present so that he can share that with others. Looking at the past gives him a means of focusing on present struggles and the way to unify in order to save them.

In section four, Neruda explains that death has invited him in the water's motion or in the wind's rush.<sup>10</sup> With his own death before his eyes, he searches for the eternal trace of life:

Quise nadar en las más anchas vidas,  
en las más sueltas desembocaduras,  
y cuando poco a poco el hombre fue negándose  
y fue cerrando paso y puerta para que no tocaran  
mis manos manantiales su inexistencia herida,  
entonces fui por calle y calle y río y río,  
y ciudad y ciudad y cama y cama,  
y atravesó el desierto mi máscara salobre,  
y en las últimas casas humilladas, sin lámpara, sin fuego,  
sin pan, sin piedra, sin silencio, solo,  
rodé muriendo de mi propia muerte. (4, 21-31)

I've tried to swim in the most expansive lives,  
in the most free-flowing estuaries,  
and when man went on denying me  
and kept blocking the path and door so that  
my headspring hands could not touch his wounded inexistence,  
then I went from street to street and river to river,  
city to city and bed to bed,  
my brackish masks traversed the desert,  
and in the last humiliated homes, without light or fire,  
without bread, without stone, without silence, alone,

I rolled on dying of my own death.<sup>11</sup>

He does not find the "inexistencia herida" ("wounded inexistence") of the workers, nor does he discover the essence of life. In looking for the eternal life, he searches for death since that is what he finds.

Yet, he does not find death in the rooms of the "casas humilladas" ("humiliated homes"); rather, he sees the daily deaths caused by work. The workers have only the little deaths that kill them slowly, so when death finally comes to them, it comes as relief. However, since this outcome is hardly comforting, Neruda tells us that he has climbed to Macchu Picchu to find another answer, to find "faith," as he mentions in *Confieso que he vivido (Memoir)*. Since he cannot find the essential life of human beings among the living, he turns to the past to continue his search.

He goes to Macchu Picchu because he sees it as the "Alto arrecife de la aurora humana" ("Towering reef of human dawn") (6, 11). Human beings and nature are connected at the site; he tells us, "Aquí los pies del hombre descansaron de noche / junto a los pies del águila" ("Here man's feet rested at night / beside the eagle's feet") (6, 19-20). Seeing this connection does not provide him with a view of the living seed of Incan or Pre-Incan civilizations, but understanding the connection allows him a glimpse of human contingency and of a type of human permanence:

Ya no sois, manos de araña, débiles  
hebras, tela enmarañada:  
cuanto fuisteis cayó: costumbres, sílabas  
raídas, máscaras de luz deslumbradora.

Pero una permanencia de piedra y de palabra:  
la ciudad como un caso se levantó en las manos  
de todos, vivos, muertos, callados, sostenidos  
de tanta muerte, un muro, de tanta vida un golpe  
de pétalos de piedra: la rosa permanente, la morada:

este arrecife andino de colonias glaciales. (7, 18-27)

You are no more, spider hands, fragile  
filaments, spun web:  
all that you were has fallen: customs, frayed  
syllables, masks of dazzling light.

But a permanence of stone and word:  
the citadel was raised like a chalice in the hands  
of all, the living, the dead, the silent, sustained  
by so much death, a wall, from so much life a stroke  
of stone petals: the permanent rose, the dwelling:  
this Andean reef of glacial colonies.<sup>12</sup>

The Incan and Pre-Incan people are lost with no living seed. No matter what connection there was to nature at the site, nature bears no trace of these people. Their customs and words cannot be reconstructed by the historian, but the stone site that they built has remained, forming a wall to hold back the forgetting flow of time and death. The site acts as a tombstone, but more than that, it stands, as the chalice image insists, as a celebration of life, a “rosa permanente,” because it portrays the brief nature of the flower, which for once in this site is permanent. Yet, while the image of the stone is clear, the permanence of word is more troubling, for the site is silent, the narrator tells us, yet the speaker, the poet, sees a connection between the creation of the site and the creation of his own words. Language carves out a space for human history, but more to the point, language allows these ancient people to exist in the words of the poem. The poet realizes a similarity in the poem and the site. At this point, he shifts in *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* from using his language as a tool for personal searching to a means that will allow others to search the past and to provide witness to whatever life remains in the stone. Before moving on, it should be noted that the idea that his words

are like stone is in ways self-deceptive. While many poets have made similar conceits, that words alone remain unchanged with time is hardly true.

Thus, in section eight the tone significantly shifts, as can be seen by the first line: “Sube conmigo, amor americano” (“Rise up with me, American love”) (8, 1). The speaker becomes spokesperson, not quite as witness yet, but as the poem progresses, he takes on that role as well. His call in this section is for the life of the past to rise in the midst of nature’s harshness:

entre el agua veloz y las murallas,  
recoge el aire del desfiladero,  
las paralelas láminas del viento,  
el canal ciego de las cordilleras,  
el áspero saludo del rocío,  
y sube, flor a flor, por las espesura. (8, 49-54)

between the swift water and the walls,  
gather the air from the gorge,  
the parallel sheets of the wind,  
the cordilleras’ blind canal,  
the harsh greeting of the dew,  
and, rise up, flower by flower, through the dense growth.

Life exists in “espesura” (“dense growth”), between the passage of time (the water) and death (the wall). His call for life to rise suggests that he has found the human seed in the stone that he could not find earlier; he tells us, “El reino muerto vive todavía” (“The dead kingdom is alive”) (8, 62).

In section nine, he presents an epic catalogue of the landscape and what he sees. He names the objects and ideas that he views at the site; this section describes the beauty of the site and its contents, but what is significant for the speaker is not only the site’s nature and architecture, but its absence of human presence. When he finishes his catalogue in this section, he asks at the beginning of section ten where the

human beings were : “Piedra en la piedra, el hombre, dónde estuvo?” (“Stone upon stone, and man, where was he?”) (10, 1). He soon answers his own question by seeing the human beings buried under the weight of their daily deaths, as he mentioned earlier. Those who worked to build the site were buried in their labor. Nita Dewberry explains that Neruda begins in *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* to understand the layers of the land as encasing history (xix), and she is correct for Neruda calls out to the site to revive the site’s workers:

Macchu Picchu, pusiste  
piedra en la piedra, y en la base, harapo?  
Carbón sobre carbón, y en el fondo la lágrima?  
Fuego en el oro, y en él, temblando el rojo  
goterón de la sangre?  
Devuélveme el esclavo que enterraste!  
Sacude de las tierras el pan duro  
del miserable, muéstrame los vestidos  
del siervo y su ventana.  
Dime cómo durmió cuando vivía.  
Dime si fue su sueño  
ronco, entreabierto, como un hoyo negro  
hecho por la fatiga sobre el muro.  
El muro, el muro! (10, 24-37)

Macchu Picchu, did you put  
stone upon stone and, at the base, tatters?  
Coal upon coal and, at the bottom, tears?  
Fire in gold and, within it, the trembling  
drop of red blood?  
Bring me back the slave that you buried!  
Shake from the earth the hard bread  
of the poor wretch, show me  
the slave’s clothing and his window.  
Tell me how he slept when he lived.  
Tell me if his sleep was  
harsh, gaping, like a black chasm  
worn by fatigue upon the wall.  
The wall, the wall!<sup>13</sup>

He asks if the site was built upon the forced labor and hunger of past workers. Finally, finding the goal of his search, he summons the past workers to make them part of the present—he summons their history to become part of his own. To put it another way, as John Felsteiner does, he uses the memory of these people to redeem their lives, to redeem their time lost from daily deaths (41). The wall that the workers are sitting on is the wall that they have built and also the wall against time. Here we should recall the speaker's words from earlier; Macchu Picchu contains “una permanencia de piedra y de palabra” (“a permanence of stone and word”) (7, 22). The wall that the workers are on is the architecture of the site. The permanence of word is that of the poet recalling them. In the history presented in *Canto general*, these workers are the first who have been downtrodden and must be recalled. After this section, the progression of *Canto general* is that of recalling both the liberators and the downtrodden workers to highlight the seed and the reason for the Communist Party.<sup>14</sup>

After he asks Macchu Picchu about the ancient people, he recalls the people from the site. The speaker states that he wants to forget the stone of the site and remember the people, which he does by envisioning them through their work and lives:

veo el antiguo ser, servidor, el dormido  
en los campos, veo un cuerpo, mil cuerpos, un hombre, mil  
mujeres,  
bajo la racha negra, negros de lluvia y noche,  
con la piedra pesada de la estatua:  
Juan Cortapiedras, hijo de Wiracocha,  
Juan Comefrío, hijo de estrella verde,  
Juan Piesdescalzos, nieto de la turquesa. (11, 18-24)

I see the man of old, the servant, asleep in the fields,  
I see a body, a thousand bodies, a man, a thousand women,  
black with rain and night, beneath the black squall,  
with the heavy stone of the statue:  
Juan Stonecutter, son of Wiracocha,

Juan Coldeater, son of a green star,  
Juan Barefoot, grandson of turquoise.

The speaker sees the workers among the site and gives them generic names in order to give them life. By naming the ancient workers, he creates their lost history through language.<sup>15</sup> He posits them as the beginning workers, as the seed, of later Latin American workers; they are the first downtrodden comrades that will be redeemed through the camaraderie of the people, an act which will bring forth a communist system of government.

Now that he has named and created the vision of the Incan/Pre-Incan workers, in section twelve he calls them to be born: “Sube a nacer conmigo, hermano” (“Rise up to be born with me, my brother”) (12, 1).<sup>16</sup> The “conmigo” (“with me”) is significant here since the speaker does not state that the past worker will rise on his or her own; rather, the worker will be reborn through the works of the poet. In connection with the resurrectional power of his words, it should also be noted that Neruda attempts to replace the Christian symbol of Christ’s blood with the blood of the people. Neruda heavily criticizes Christianity, but *Canto general* has a biblical style, from its portrayal of a new genesis to its prophetic poet who sings the new religion, which in the case of Neruda is communism. Many critics, such as Santí, Moquette, Magdalena Sola, and DeHay, have discussed the religious aspects of *Canto general*. In addition, the resurrectional powers he claims for his words contrast with Whitman’s ideas since Whitman focuses more on the semi-resurrectional qualities of the soul. In speaking of the ability to bring back the workers, the speaker assumes the roles of the workers:

Mírame desde el fondo de la tierra,  
labrador, tejedor, pastor callado,  
domador de guanacos tutelares:

albañil del andamio desafiado:

.....

Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta. (12, 8-11, 28)

Behold me from the depths of the earth,

laborer, weaver, silent herdsman:

tamer of the tutelary guanacos:

mason of the defied scaffold:

.....

I've come to speak through your dead mouths.

Section twelve is the culmination of *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, for in it the poet makes the claim that he is both brother to and witness of the past workers of Latin America. He will speak through their mouths and from their working positions. Moreover, Neruda portrays the common workers of Macchu Picchu in a fashion similar to contemporary Latin American workers in order to create a shared sense of history. As he reveals in *Confieso que he vivido (Memoir)*, when he visited Macchu Picchu, he felt connected to all Americans. This sentiment is one that he wants to replicate in the reader by showing a shared past for Latin Americans. Neruda portrays contemporary and past workers linked primarily through their working and living conditions. Even though he presents a connection through land, the connection is through the blood spilt on the land, not on the actual passing down of blood through families. In this role, he takes on the position of *the poet* of Latin America; he becomes the voice of the common Latin American, just as Whitman took on the role of the paradigmatic American in *Song of Myself*. In the last lines of *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, Neruda asks the past figures to come to life through his voice: "Acudid a mis venas y a mi boca / Hablad por mis palabras y mi sangre" ("Hasten to my veins and to my mouth./ Speak through my words and my blood") (12, 44-45). With the workers speaking through his voice, Neruda can claim that he is speaking for the common worker, that he is the poet of the people and of camaraderie.



Roberto González Echevarría notes that *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* reminds a reader of the voyages to the land of the dead by heroes in the epics of Homer, Virgil, or Dante (“Introduction” 7). Neruda travels into a dead realm, confronts death, and finds in his confrontation the answer he needs to move forward. Like Odysseus who voyages into Hades to learn his way home, Neruda travels to Macchu Picchu to learn what to write as a poet, and once there, his experience of the past and the present together shows him that his future rests with becoming an epic poet. Like Dante, then, who collapses the heroic figures sung by Homer and Virgil into his own poetic persona, Neruda finds the answer to his poetic calling by using his personal voice and experiences to sing the future. In other words, his experience at Macchu Picchu shows him the necessity of making the lyric the mooring point for the modern epic. Again, like Dante whose voyage in the underworld leads to revelation, Neruda’s trip to Macchu Picchu leads him to the revelation that he must found a tradition that will raise the common person, but a tradition that is rooted in the individual. In creating such a tradition, the lyric-epic is necessary for him since he uses the centrality of his voice in transforming the death and pain of so many silent people into meaning. Ultimately, his revelation leads him to become a lyric-epic writer for communism.

## II. The Call for Camaraderie

From his position as the poet of the people, Neruda focuses on three primary concepts to show the need for camaraderie among Latin Americans: that it is natural, that it is born out of the betrayal of past leaders, and that many people are already coming together in camaraderie through their struggles and workers’ unions.

The first concept that is used to show camaraderie as a necessity is the connection between camaraderie and nature, a connection which is abundant in the work. For example, in the section *Los conquistadores* (*The Conquistadors*), Neruda presents the division of the land during the conquest as written in blood, as he states in “Se entierran las lanzas” (“The spears are buried”), “Así quedó repartido el patrimonio. / La sangre dividió la patria entera” (“And so the patrimony was partitioned. / Blood divided the entire country”) (1-2). This dividing through bloodshed is not natural, so the soil reacts to the division. Again, in “Valdivia” he describes the reaction of nature to the horrific deeds of the conquistadors’ slaughter of native tribes:

Pero aquí la unidad sombría  
de árbol y piedra, lanza y rostro,  
trasmitió el crimen en el viento.  
.....  
Así nació la guerra patria. (50-52, 58)

But here the somber unity  
of tree and stone, spear and face,  
transmitted the crime in the wind.  
.....  
And so the people’s war began.

The trees and stones remember the conquistadors’ crimes; moreover, the people’s war, which we learn throughout the work is the war of liberation that ultimately leads to communism was born out of the same resentment. In many of the poems, the resentment of betrayal is seen as a seed, a natural part of birth that will aid in unifying the people.

Moreover, many of the men Neruda places in the section *Los libertadores* (*The Liberators*) are shown as connected to nature because they helped free and unify the people. For example, Tupac Amaru, a rebellious Inca, is shown in “Tupac Amaru” to

have become a seed. Of San Martín, one of the two most well-known Latin American liberators, the poet states, “la tierra que nos diste, un ramo / de cedrón que golpea consu aroma” (“the land that you gave us, a branch / of cedrón with an aroma that stuns”) (“San Martín” 13-14). Bernardo O’Higgins, the liberator of Chile, is described as rustic, smelling of the country. Lautaro, the Araucanian leader described in Ercilla’s *Araucanid*, is portrayed as a jaguar “en traje de relámpago” (“in a suit of lightning”) (“Lautaro contra el Centauro” 12).

The conquistadors or betrayers of the people are described primarily as working against nature or as being malicious natural elements, such as strangling vines or carnivorous flowers. For example, the conquistadors are described as bringing machinery and technology to the New World.<sup>17</sup> In the section *La arena traicionada* (The Sand Betrayed), corrupt rulers are described as grotesque “salteadores de banca y bolsa, / pijes, granfinos, pitucos” (“bank and bourse robbers, / fops, dandies, swells”) (“La crema” 7-8). With their haciendas, the corrupt rulers have embittered the mountains and the minerals.<sup>18</sup> Machado has brought machine guns to Cuba. Rosas, an Argentinean tyrant, uses daggers to store corpses along with metal in storerooms. Through these images, Neruda portrays the betrayal of the people as unnatural and the unity, the camaraderie, of the people as natural.

The second concept that shows the need for camaraderie in Latin America is the betrayal of the people in the past. As I have mentioned, Roberto González Echevarría views betrayal as the central theme of *Canto general* (9); however, while betrayal is important for the work, it is the unity born of betrayal that Neruda focuses on. By displaying the betrayal of the people in the past, Neruda hopes to energize and to bring

together the people in the present so that they can move together to strengthen the Communist Party and achieve pure democracy. In the first poem of *La arena traicionada* Neruda says that he describes the horrors of the people's betrayers so that their crimes can be seen, be known, and then be set aside. Yet, González Echevarría's comments are understandable since Neruda's portrayal of the people betrayed is in some cases so horrific that it stands out in the work.

One of the better known poems of betrayal and tyranny is "Los dictadores" ("The Dictators"):

Ha quedado un olor entre los cañaverales:  
una mezcla de sangre y cuerpo, un penetrante  
pétalo nauseabundo.  
Entre los cocoteros las tumbas están llenas  
de huesos demolidos, de estertores callados.  
El delicado sátrapa conversa  
con copas, cuellos y cordones de oro.  
El pequeño palacio brilla como un reloj  
y las rápidas risas enguantadas  
atraviesan a veces los pasillos  
y se reúnen a las voces muertas  
y a las bocas azules frescamente enterradas.  
El llanto está escondido como una planta  
cuya semilla cae sin cesar sobre el suelo  
y hace crecer sin luz sus grandes hojas ciegas.  
El odio se ha formado escama a escama,  
golpe a golpe, en el agua terrible del pantano,  
con un hocico lleno de légamo y silencio. (1-18)

There's a lingering smell in the sugarcane fields:  
a mixture of blood and body, a penetrating  
nauseous petal.  
Amid the coconut palms graves are filled  
with demolished bones, smothered gasps.  
The delicate satrap chats  
with wineglasses, collars, and gold braids.  
The little palace shines like a wristwatch  
and smart gloved laughter  
occasionally drifts across the hallways  
to join dead voices

and freshly buried mouths.  
The sob is hidden like a plant  
whose seed falls ceaselessly to the ground  
and makes its great blind leaves grow without light.  
Hatred has been formed scale by scale,  
blow by blow, in the terrible water of the swamp,  
with a snout full of clay and silence.

This poem occurs in the section *América, no invoco tu nombre in vano* (*America, I Do Not Invoke Your Name In Vain*), a section which Maria Magdalena Sola states is Neruda's brief overview of the condition of Latin America as a whole (103). This poem, while specific in its images of death, is intended primarily as a last look at Latin American political corruption before Neruda turns to write about Chile. The blood, specifically here the smell, ranges through the fields and becomes something that must be redeemed. Again, the seed symbol is present. "El llanto" ("the sob") is like a plant, a natural object, and its seeds fall to the ground from which new plants will arise. The poet tells us that "odio" ("hatred") has been formed by each blow, and it is on this image that he focuses in this section of the work. All of Latin America has been inflicted with torture of some kind, whether from the conquistadors, the politicians, or the North, as Neruda calls the United States. Because of the pains that they have suffered, Latin Americans must unify to protect themselves and institute a government. Manuel A. Matos Moquette suggests this need for unity is the reason for *Canto general*, for he believes Neruda foresees unity, fraternity, as a strategic means for protection (15). In this poem the politicians betray the people, slaughtering and leaving them in the fields, fields that the people work for sugarcane. This betrayal is evidenced throughout this section and in *La arena traicionada* where reference to sugarcane fields points to the politicians betraying the people for money. This sentiment occurs often in the central

poems of *Canto general*, many times with the United States being at the heart of the critique and the reason why the people need to unify.<sup>19</sup> To combat the United States, Neruda suggests that camaraderie is the primary way of pulling together Latin Americans for their independence from tyrannical political rulers and the overpowering capitalism of the United States.<sup>20</sup>

In the narrative progression of *Canto general*, Neruda presents first the imperialism of the North and then the need to come together. As Magdalena Sola discusses, this progression shapes *La arena traicionada*, for first come the lawyers, diplomats, bordellos, and then the multinational corporations, such as Standard Oil, Anaconda Mining, and United Fruit (102). In many of these poems, the corporations replace the governmental powers in the regions; they act as new religions, as can be seen from the opening lines of “La United Fruit Co.”:

Cuando sonó la trompeta, estuvo  
todo preparado en la tierra  
y Jehová repartió el mundo  
a Coca-Cola Inc., Anaconda,  
Ford Motors, y otra entidades:  
La Compañía Frutera Inc.  
se reservó lo más jugoso,  
la costa central de mi tierra,  
la dulce cintura de América.  
Bautizó de nuevo sus tierras  
como “Repúblicas Bananas.” (1-11)

When the trumpet blared everything  
on earth was prepared  
and Jehovah distributed the world  
to Coca-Cola Inc., Anaconda,  
Ford Motors and other entities:  
United Fruit Inc.  
reserved for itself the juiciest,  
the central seaboard of my land,  
America's sweet waist.  
It rebaptized its lands  
the “Banana Republics.”

The multinational corporations, which are primarily from the U. S., divide Latin America and make the division seem natural or inevitable by buying off the politicians. The trumpet and the rebaptism show the descent of capitalism from the North to Latin America. A few lines later in this poem, the speaker states that the corporations have set up “moscas” (“flies”) to suck on the blood of the people.

In this poem, as in many poems in this section, Neruda takes on the role of witness, and through this role, he shows what written histories do not show, since those in power have written them. He attempts to gather the people together collectively since they have experienced similar sorrows from hunger and miserable living conditions for the same reasons. Moreover, he explains how seeing horrific events in numerous countries has focused him as part of the people. For example, in “Las tierras y los hombres” (“Land and Men”), he states:

Yo entré en las casas profundas,  
como cuevas de ratas, húmedas  
de salitre y de sal podrida,  
vi arrastrarse seres hambrientos.

.....  
Me atravesaron los dolores  
de mi pueblo, se me enredaron  
como alambrados en el alma:

.....  
Entonces me hice soldado:  
número oscuro, regimiento,  
orden de puños combatientes,  
sistema de la inteligencia,  
fibra del tiempo innumerable,  
árbol armado, indestructible  
camino del hombre en la tierra.

Y vi cuántos éramos, cuántos  
estaban junto a mí, no eran  
nadie, eran todos los hombres. (44-47, 51-53, 62-71)

I entered homes, deep

rat holes drenched  
in nitrate and putrid salt:  
I saw hungry beings shuffle along

.....  
My people's suffering  
pierced me, entangled  
my soul like barbed wire

.....  
Then I became a soldier  
obscure number, regiment  
order or combatant fists,  
systematic intelligence,  
fiber of innumerable time,  
armed tree, man's  
indestructible road on earth.

And I saw how many we were,  
how many there were beside me—they  
were nobody, they were the people.

In this poem Neruda states that the suffering of the people makes him part of the struggle for change. Even more, his personal reaction provides us with the paradigmatic reaction. Since he has taken on the role of the people's poet, his reaction shows us the people's reaction, or an idea of the people's reaction. As he says a few poems earlier in this section in "Los poetas celestes" ("The Cestial Poets"), everyone should speak out against these events. Read in light of Neruda's claim in *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, he portrays himself as speaking for the people of the present and the past so that we can read the words "nadie" ("nobody") and "los hombres" ("the people") to mean that people who have died and those who remain have no say in politics; thus, they are nobody. These people have all experienced the same horrors and stand beside him in unity. A few lines later, he says that they all walk with him with "los mismos pasos" ("the same steps") (75). In this poem and other similar poems, Neruda claims to speak for the people and to react as the people do; moreover, his presentation



of the events and his reaction are intended to persuade his audience to react in a similar fashion. As stated before, he believes that *Canto general* creates a central myth, the myth of a Pan-American state governed through an ideal version of communism, that will pull together Latin Americans and will show others in the world a vision of a unified Latin America. The presentation of camaraderie and the portrayal of the people betrayed are meant to pull the people together for this task.

The third concept that Neruda uses to convince Latin Americans to band together is that the unity of the people is already forming through their embracing of each other in unions, through their suffering, and through their embracing of him as their poet. Especially in the section *El fugitivo* (*The Fugitive*), containing poems in which Neruda describes his flight from the Chilean government, we see this sense of fraternity. For example, in poem four of this section, he describes a young couple who took him in to protect him even though they did not know him; he tells us they were united with him in his struggle. Again, in the first poem *El fugitivo*, he tells of traveling from safe house to safe house, being greeted by “signos fraternales” (“fraternal signs”) (12). Also, in poem five, he tells of entering into the house of a sailor. The sailor does not know him, but he says:

“Él pertenece  
a nosotros, los pobres —me respondió—,  
él no hace burla ni desprecio  
de nuestra pobre vida, él la levanta  
y la defiende.” (12-16)

“He belongs  
to us, the poor,” he replied,  
“he doesn’t ridicule or disdain  
our poor life, he upholds it  
and defends it.”

The poor claim Neruda as their own; they treat him like their voice, and he shows us these images in this section to point to the unity of the people and his place as proclaiming that unity. In these poems and in the next section, *Las flores de Punitaqui* (*The Flowers of Punitaqui*), he is named as “hermano Pablo” (“brother Pablo”). The people accepting him is his way of showing the common people in his work. He visits workers in their homes, in fields, and in the mines to connect the worker to the ideals of *Canto general*. Also, this presentation of the workers gives them a voice, as Sonja Karsen argues, that they would not usually have (231). In other words, they are viewed as equals in politics and language. After he establishes himself as a brother/comrade and shows the unity of Latin American through suffering, he directs the energy that he has created in the reader towards the Communist Party.

### III. Unity/Camaraderie

As with Walt Whitman, for whom unity is a central concept in political theory, Neruda presents unity as a key element of Latin America’s future; however, he hopes his presentation of camaraderie will lead the reader to communism, a key goal in his work. In one of the later poems of *Canto general*, he suggests that the Communist Party has taught him “la fraternidad hacia el que no conozco” (“fraternity towards the unknown man”) (“A mi partido” 1) and that it can teach others the same. He states that his poetry has been formed by the people, by the sobbing in the fields, and that it will be the “libro común de un hombre” “common book of mankind” (“Termino aquí” 17) from which people will draw inspiration to become communists. Moreover, in several of the later poems, Neruda calls for the people to rise up in unity. For example, in “La letra” (“The Letter”) he says, “Anda como un ejército, reunido, / y golpea la tierra con tus

pasos / y con la misma identidad sonora” (“March like an army, united, / and pound the earth with your footsteps / and with the same sonorous identity”) (12-14). In the last section of the work, Neruda explains communism as the ultimate goal of unity in Latin America. He says in “A mi partido” (“To My Party”) that communism has shown him that the pain of all the people perishes in “la victoria de todos” (“the victory of all”) (8). The goal of his work is to expose the suffering and show the means for and myth of unity in Latin America.

In the last section of *Canto general*, *Yo soy (I Am)*, Neruda mentions that, like Whitman, he intended the work for future poets, for “los nuevos poetas de América” (“the new poets of America”) (“Testamento Aquí” 4). Moreover, he tells us:

Este libro termina aquí. Ha nacido  
de la ira como una brasa, como los territorios  
de bosques incendiados, y deseo  
que continúe como un árbol rojo  
propagando su clara quemadura.  
.....  
Libro común de un hombre, pan abierto  
es esta geografía de mi canto,  
y una comunidad de labradores  
alguna vez recogerá su fuego.  
y sembrará ses llamas y sus hojas  
otra vez en la nave de la tierra. (“Termino Aquí” 1-5, 17-22)

This book ends here. It was born  
of fury like a live coal, like territories  
of burned forests, and I hope that  
it continues like a red tree  
propagating its transparent burn.  
.....  
Common book of mankind, broken bread  
is this geography of my song,  
and the community of peasants  
will one day harvest its fire  
and will again sow its flames  
and leaves in the ship of the earth.

Like Whitman, Neruda hoped that his book would be the common book for a communist society and that it would help create the intellectual climate for communism among the people. In other words, his book would serve as societal common ground to make communism a viable prospect in Latin America, which is, no doubt, a difficult if not impossible task for any single book. As with Whitman, camaraderie, the shared sense of fraternity among strangers, will help form a new governmental system. By treating others as comrades, the people will respect each other's rights and needs.

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rise to be born with me, brother. (my trans.)

<sup>2</sup> Although Whitman praises the progress of industry, he is not completely comfortable with the capitalist system. In several of his writings, he laments, as does Thoreau, the problem of the individual's place in such a system.

<sup>3</sup> While Neruda criticizes the culture of the West for its legacy of imperialism in Latin America, Neruda often celebrates the writers of the West. Like Whitman, he claims a new tradition of writing for Latin America, but also like Whitman he does not want to, nor can he, dismiss the presence of past Western writers.

<sup>4</sup> There are sixty-six instances of pan (bread) in *Canto general*.

<sup>5</sup> *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* was originally published before *Canto general*, and many critics have treated it as a whole on its own; however, Neruda incorporated it into *Canto general*, and the work is best considered within its context.

<sup>6</sup> The placement of the poet's inspiration in an Incan city is appropriate for Neruda's political ideals since the Incas are widely argued historically to have had a socialist form of government with the Inca at the top as ruler. As John Crow explains, as long as the common people worked, they were provided with their basic needs (23).

<sup>7</sup> In the historical sequence of *Canto general*, at this point in the work we have only been introduced to a newly created landscape and the birth of human beings.

<sup>8</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Neruda was the first person to use language in the history of Latin America; rather, Neruda presents this moment of discovery at Macchu Picchu as the introduction of language into his rewriting of history.

<sup>9</sup> Neruda's use of the dropping image, i.e. descending into the past, echoes Whitman's from poems like "Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd."

<sup>10</sup> Whitman often discusses death through water images. See "On the Beach at Night."

<sup>11</sup> These repetitive language constructions are part of Neruda's inheritance from Whitman.

<sup>12</sup> The filament and spider imagery is similar to Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider." In that poem, like Neruda's here, Whitman uses the filaments to show the fragile nature of life and knowing.

<sup>13</sup> The symbol of poor workers' blood comes to signify the seed of the Communist Party for Neruda in this work. Since it is symbolic of the people's inherent connection to the party, the blood colors the flag of the Communist Party.

<sup>14</sup> The speaker focuses on the hunger of the workers and their general environs. These problems are the same ones as those about which he is concerned with contemporary Latin Americans. Bread, which is Neruda's main symbol of hunger, is one of the rallying cries of contemporary Latin Americans.

<sup>15</sup> The name of Juan returns later in a section entitled *La tierra se llama Juan* (*The Earth's Name is Juan*). In this section Juan becomes the generic name for the eternal spirit of the Latin American people. Neruda says "that Juan 'ha nacido de nuevo como una planta eternal' ('was born again like an eternal plant') (8).

<sup>16</sup> *Hermano* (brother) and *camarada* (comrade) are used with a similar connotation throughout *Canto general*. Thus, the discussion of camaraderie takes into account Neruda's use of *hermano*.

<sup>17</sup> See "A pesar de la ira" ("Despite the Fury").

<sup>18</sup> See "Melgarejo."

<sup>19</sup> To suggest that Neruda was original for being wary of encroaching U.S. imperialism would be to forget some of the main revolutionary figures of Latin America, such as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, and an undercurrent of twentieth-century Latin American thought. This sentiment has surfaced violently recently through protest in Brazil and Argentina at the Free Trade of the Americas Agreement meetings and at the World Bank meetings.

<sup>20</sup> While Neruda critiques business practices from the U.S., he believes that the people of the U.S. do not necessarily support those practices. He critiques the U.S. by saying that U.S. policy should listen to the American poet Whitman and stop their exploitive practices in Latin America. He says to Whitman in poem three of *Que*

*despierte el leñador (Let the Woodcutter Awaken)*, “Cantemos juntos lo que se levanta / de todos los Dolores” (“Let’s sing together whatever arises / from all the sorrows”) (67-68). His faith in the U.S. common people is partially from his visits and partially from his vision of them provided by Whitman. For a detailed analysis, see Johnson’s “Neruda’s Impressions of the United States and its People.”

## Chapter 8: History and Redemption: Neruda in Creation

!Tengo mis versos, que son  
Más fuertes que tu puñal!<sup>1</sup>

José Martí (35, 3-4)

No renunciéis al día os entregan  
los muertos que lucharon.<sup>2</sup>

Pablo Neruda (*Obras* / 459)

History and historiography are central in understanding *Canto general*, for the narrative progression of the work is from creation in Latin America to the contemporary period. In essence, Neruda presents what he believes are the major historical events of Latin America since creation. His task, while difficult, would be deemed an utter failure if presented by an academic historian. Neruda leaves out dates, makes no attempt to show any connection between periods, disregards traditional historic distinctions, creates individuals, and makes enormous temporal shifts without notice. For many, this style of presentation is terminal to the project; moreover, since Neruda portrays history as a progression towards communism, many critics, such as Vera Stegmann, have been quick to dismiss the historical vision of the work due to its deviance from Marx's understanding of historical progression (149). Admittedly, Marx's interpretation of historical progression is much more astute than Neruda's and is more grounded in traditional historians' views of history, even if Marx deviates to create an original interpretation. While Neruda had read Marx, his interpretation of Marxism and communism was second-hand. His introduction to communism came during his early period in Spain and was as much driven by empathy for suffering workers as by theory. To attempt to understand *Canto general* as an extension of Marxist thought only leaves one dissatisfied, for while Neruda valued Marx, his interpretation of history was rooted in

Latin America.<sup>3</sup> Having been taught and having read traditional views of Latin American history as a youth, Neruda attempts through his lyric-epic work to present an alternate version of history to those promulgated by Latin American governments.<sup>4</sup> His focus is on the poor, the workers, and the natives—the blood they shed, their struggles for independence, and the erasure of their names. He wants to create a new vision of history that places the common person at the center of concern and shows how history progresses towards the fulfillment of the common person's needs. His historical schema, in a rhetorical fashion similar to Whitman's, provides a framework for understanding communism in Latin America and for strengthening the people's desire to implement communist governments in the region; thus, the work was written not only as a lyric-epic meant to define America, but as a lyric-epic of communism. For this reason, in 1947 the Chilean Communist Party granted Neruda a leave of absence to complete *Canto general*. As Neruda, it had hopes that such a project would motivate the people, much like a religious text motivates followers of that religion.<sup>5</sup> This chapter discusses how Neruda attempted this persuasive project through his vision of history, his idea of progress, and his view of the redemption afforded through progress. Each of these ideas can be explored by examining the historical narrative in the work.

### I. The Structure of Neruda's History

Neruda's vision of history is linear. Unlike Whitman, he does not view history as in any way circular; however, he does think that action is cumulative. All of the wrongs done towards a people add up until they eventually create motivation to redress them; in addition, all of a people's acts towards freedom collect until there is enough motivation to fulfill the dream. Much of Neruda's writing in *Canto general* shows the common



buildup of certain wrongs and desires—primarily the horrors perpetrated on the poor and the resulting need for communism. For us to see these layers of accumulated deeds, we should explore the historical narrative because it underlies the main themes and reveals how Neruda perceives writing history. His narrative starts where his history begins, with genesis in Latin America.

*La lámpara en la tierra* (*A Lamp on Earth*) acts, as Maria Magdalena Sola states, as a preamble to *Canto general* (88), starting in a time that Roberto González Echevarría views as prehistoric, even though Neruda dates the time at around 1400 (“Introduction” 7). The date, though significant for history, is not important to the narrative. In this first section of *Canto general*, Neruda shows the Americas as hardly formed. He describes the vegetation, the rivers, the animals, and the people as if seeing them before history begins. In “Amor américa” he states:

*Antes de la peluca y las casaca  
fueron los ríos, ríos arteriales:  
fueron las cordilleras, en cuya onda raída  
el cóndor o la nieve parecían inmóviles:  
fue la humedad y las espesura, el trueno  
sin nombre todavía, las pampas planetarias. (1-6)*

*Before the wig and the dress coat  
there were rivers, arterial rivers:  
there were cordilleras, jagged waves where  
the condor and the snow seemed immutable:  
there was dampness and dense growth, the thunder  
as yet unnamed, the planetary pampas.*

Before the formalities (wig and dress coat) brought by Europeans, the landscape was in pristine form, yet it was without name. This theme of naming runs throughout *La lámpara en la tierra*, for without a name for places and events, history as linear progression cannot be written. The place is prehistoric, even though we can place a

date on it, since without the motion of historical progress, this period could have existed at any time before the conquest. In exploring this preconquest period, Neruda envisions the Americas as innocent, as Nita Dewberry argues (xii), but he presents himself as searching for native ancestors when he says in “Amor América”, “te busqué, padre mío, / joven guerrero de tiniebla y cobre” (“I searched for you, my father, / young warrior of darkness and copper”) (30-31). He finds traces of his ancestors among the landscape, even though he believes that they are lost; however, in the process of looking, he experiences a new birth, as if in searching for the past figures, he brings life through telling their stories. The language sounds biblical in the first section; González Echevarría states that the language evokes “the words of a religion in the process of being founded, of a liturgy establishing its rituals and choosing its words” (“Introduction” 7). Magdalena Sola says this section is infused with the tone of a “primeval religion” (88) with the poet describing the landscape as if it is being born and painting the Amerindians as part of nature. We are told that when their language of nature was lost a “gota roja” (“red drop”) (“Amor américa” 21) fell; this image repeats numerous times in *Canto general*; red becomes Neruda’s signal of communism in the work.<sup>6</sup> In other words, communism will rise from the split blood of the people and landscape.

In the second section of *Canto general*, *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* (*The Heights of Macchu Picchu*), Neruda claims to be the poet of Latin Americans. After the genesis of *La lámpara en la tierra*, he tells the history of Latin America. This section marks the shift between pre-language and language, between circular history (history without any noticeable appreciation) and linear/progressive history. Moreover, as well as signaling a shift in concepts of history, this section also signals that history is progressing towards

communism. At the end of *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, the poet asks the Amerindians to rise up with him in unity, and at the end of *Canto general*, he repeats this call for the workers of Latin America.

After *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, the bulk of *Canto general* concerns the progress from the conquest to the rise of communism; Neruda writes his personal experience into the second half. *Los conquistadores* (*The Conquistadors*) is the first section after *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, and the first poem, “Vienen por las islas” (“They come through the islands”), has the date 1493, which is the starting date of our narrative; it contains several of the themes discussed in this section.

Los carniceros desolaron las isles.  
Guanahaní fue la primera  
en este historia de martirios.  
Los hijos de la arcilla vieron rota  
su sonrisa, golpeada  
su frágil estatura de venados,  
y aun en la muerte no entendía  
.....  
Sólo quedaban huesos  
rigidamente colocados  
en forma de cruz, para mayor  
gloria de Dios y de los hombres. (1-7, 14-17)

The butchers razed the islands.  
Guanahaní was first  
in this story of martyrdom  
The children of clay saw their smile  
shattered, beaten  
their fragile stature of deer,  
and even in death they did not understand.  
.....  
Nothing remained but bones  
rigidly arranged  
in the form of a cross, to the greater  
glory of mankind.

First, the conquistadors are portrayed as butchers and the natives as martyrs. Several critics have noted Neruda's sympathy for the Amerindians, a few pointing out that Neruda feels a deep ancestral connection to the natives. The natives are shown as one with nature, as the workers later, and this tie runs throughout this section and the work. The conquistadors bring instruments to separate human beings from nature. Neruda associates nature as a good presence, while he names the conquistadors as people who will wrench human beings from the land. Also, the poet mentions the cross as composed of bones. This image introduces a theme running throughout this section, which is that the church was complicit in the slaughter of the Amerindians and built its foundations in Latin America on the broken bodies of the natives.<sup>7</sup> Connected to this theme is one that Neruda alludes to by saying "para mayor / gloria de Dios y de los hombres" ("to the greater glory of mankind"), which is the theme of progress that the first colonizers preached, that of providing religion to the "savages" and civilizing them. Neruda often portrays this colonial image of progress alongside bloody scenes of carnage to show the cost of this so-called progression.

In this section of *Canto general*, Neruda discusses major figures and events of the colonization: the rape, as he calls it, of Cuba; Cortés' takeover from the Aztecs; the burning of native books; Atahualpa's death; Chile's discovery; Ercilla's writing. With the conquest of Chile, an important and central concern of this section, Neruda presents primarily the struggle of the Araucanians, a native tribe who has never been subdued completely in the area of southern Chile.<sup>8</sup> While detailing their unity in surviving, he also dramatizes the advent of Pedro Valdivia and his parceling out of the Chilean landscape:

Valdivia, el capitán intruso,  
cortó mi tierra con la espada  
entre ladrones

.....

“Llévaste  
este trozo de luna y arboleda,  
devórate este río con crepúsculo.” (“Valdivia” 3-5, 11-13)

Valdivia, the intrusive captain,  
cut up my land among thieves  
with his sword

.....

They divided up my homeland  
like a lifeless ass.

“Take  
this piece of moon and woodland,  
devour this river with twilight.”

In this poem Neruda portrays the violent nature of the occupation of Chile: once cut up his beloved country becomes offal, something lifeless and offensive; however, his characterization of Valdivia’s actions makes them ludicrous. How can one appropriate a piece of moon or devour a river? The passage shows Valdivia as a sad choice for a ruler, little more than a thief among many thieves. Later in the poem, when the poet remembers the slaughter of Araucanians, it is not surprising that they do not recognize Valdivia’s rule. Neruda tells us that “Así nació la guerra patria” (“Thus the people’s war began”) (48).<sup>9</sup> Among the bloody images of *Los conquistadores*, Neruda includes Ercilla, the poet of the *La araucana* (*Araucaniad*) and also the only person not accused of dividing the land with blood: “Sonoro, sólo tú no beberás la copa / de sangre” (“Sonorous, you alone will not drink the chalice / of blood”) (“Ercilla” 16-17). Just after the announcement of the people’s war, Neruda introduces us to the first traces of Chilean poetry, or at least poetry that is written about Chile.<sup>10</sup>

From *Los conquistadores*, we move to the next section *Los libertadores* (*The Liberators*), which introduces important tribal figures, such as Lautaro and Caupolicán who rose against the colonizers, and important leaders of liberation movements in Latin American, such as O'Higgins, San Martín, and Martí. In the first poem of this section, Neruda shows that the push for liberation rose from the people, from their sorrows:

*Aquí viene el árbol, el árbol  
de la tormenta, el árbol del pueblo.  
De la tierra suben sus héroes  
como las hojas por la savia  
.....  
Aquí viene el árbol, el árbol  
cuyas raíces están vivas,  
sacó salitre del martirio,  
sus raíces comieron sangre  
y extrajo lágrimas del suelo. (1-4, 18-22)*

*Here comes the tree, the tree  
of the storm, the tree of the people.  
Its heroes rise up from the earth  
as leaves from the sap  
.....  
Here comes the tree, the tree  
whose roots are alive,  
it fed on martyrdom's nitrate,  
its roots consumed blood,  
and it extracted tears from the soul.*

The main figures of liberation are just people lifted from a crowd, ordinary folk who need change from their suffering; thus, they are not above the people, but part of the people and their struggle.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the people are likened to natural images: roots, trees, sap; throughout this section Neruda emphasizes that the progress of the people to communism is natural. However, Neruda does not suggest the “manifest destiny” style of progress that Whitman does. Since he is aware of Latin America’s problems with power and its position as a materials supplier to North America, he views the progress

of communism as one to be fought for the entire way. Communism will continue its trek towards establishment in Latin America, but the route will be difficult and will seem at times impossible. The workers and the poor of Latin America must push for communism by keeping alive the leaders of liberation in their imaginations. For Neruda, the liberation movement rises from the suffering of the people. It is the blood of the people that must be requited. This sentiment is repeated many times in *Los libertadores*. For example, in “El empalado” (“Impaled”), he states of the people’s blood, “Hacia las raíces caía. / Hacia los muertos caía. / Hacia los que iban a nacer” (“It ran to the roots. / It ran to the dead. To those yet to be born”) (26-28). The blood soaks down into the soil and into those who are born from the soil. Rhetorically, this is meant to urge the reader to redeem the blood. The lyrics add a personal dimension to the redeeming of the blood of individual people.

In *Los libertadores* many of the figures are portrayed mythically, as if more real than life. For example, the speaker tells us in “Toqui Caupolicán” (“Chief Caupolicán”):

De Caupolicán el Toqui es la mirada  
hundida, de universo montañoso,  
los ojos implacables de la tierra,  
y las mejillas del titán son muros  
escalados por rayos y raíces. (29-33)

Chief Caupolicán has the deep-set  
look of a mountainous universe,  
the implacable eyes of the earth,  
and the titan’s cheeks are walls  
scaled by thunderbolts and roots.

The chief is lionized to become an ancient giant of classical mythology. Many of the liberators are portrayed in similar fashion. On the one hand, this portrayal creates a mythology for Latin America, something that Neruda thought was lacking. On the other

hand, this portrayal invents a sacred patriarchy. Several critics, such as Terry DeHay, have referred to *Canto general* as Neruda's attempt to create a new biblical text modeled on the Bible but without God (48). The liberators that he introduces become founders of a new way of life, a way of life that banishes privileges and class distinctions. It is not a coincidence that he presents as the central figure of *Los libertadores* the founder of the Chilean Communist Party, Recabarren. In his actions of unionizing and organizing the party, Recabarren comes to signify the father of the people because he helped to give the people a name: "Organizó las soledades . . . se llamó Pueblo" ("He organized the wilderness . . . it was called People") (40, 46). *Los libertadores* moves from 1520 to around 1945. The last section of *Canto general* notwithstanding, it is the most hopeful section in the work. The liberators plant the seeds of communism, and Neruda uses them to portray the progress of communism as already in motion, even if the people will be slaughtered and betrayed many times before communism is accomplished.

*Los libertadores* is heavily laced with Whitmanesque images and language. For example, in "El viento sobre Lincoln" ("The Wind Over Lincoln"), Neruda laments that the segregation Lincoln worked to dismantle has come back to permeate the culture of the United States. For Neruda the spirit of Lincoln is dead even though his name is remembered. At the end of the poem he names Lincoln as a "leñador" ("woodcutter"), which is a title that he applies later in *Canto general* to those who have the spirit to work towards communism. Neruda's version of Lincoln and Lincoln's importance descend from Whitman's view of Lincoln as a hero of democracy, as someone who argued for tolerance and acceptance, and Neruda portrays him in the same light. While Harvey



Johnson argues that Neruda's view of North America is usually one of disgust, the poet sees Lincoln as a hero who needs to be invoked so that North America can renew its democracy and begin respecting Latin America (103).

González Echevarría considers the next section, *La arena traicionada* (*The Sand Betrayed*), to be the central section of *Canto general*, for according to this critic the spark for the work comes out of Neruda's betrayal by González Videla ("Introduction" 9).<sup>12</sup> This section is the most bloody one in the work since it chronicles the actions of tyrants who took charge in Latin America after liberation. In the first poem in *La arena traicionada*, Neruda tells us the reason for including poems of betrayal and bloodshed:

*Te hablaré de estos dolores que quisiera apartar,  
te obligaré a vivir una vez más entre sus quemaduras,  
no para detenernos como en una estación, al partir,  
ni tampoco para golpear con la frente la tierra,  
ni para llenarnos el corazón con agua salada,  
sino para caminar conociendo, para tocar la rectitud  
con decisiones infinitamente cargadas de sentido,  
para que la severidad sea una condición de la alegría, para  
que así seamos invencibles. (13-21)*

*I'll tell you these sorrows I'd like to put aside,  
I'll oblige you to live among their burns again,  
not to mark time as in a terminal, before departing,  
or to beat the earth with our brows,  
or to fill our hearts with salt water,  
but to set forth knowing, to touch rectitude  
with decisions infinitely charged with meaning,  
that severity may be a condition of happiness, that  
we may become invincible.*

The poet is a witness to the bloody deeds. In writing of them, Neruda wants to provide knowledge of those deeds, not only to accuse those guilty of them but to enlighten the people so that they will not let this carnage happen again. Throughout this section, Neruda shows betrayal as progress towards communism, in other words towards

something better. As Neruda presents it, the people fight for freedom, but in the past someone or some organization, i.e. North American corporations, greedy individual rulers, or the church, has always hindered that progress. The importance of this section in *Canto general*, a work that Neruda considers will inspire people to become communists, is to warn those working for communism of past pitfalls.

In *La arena traicionada*, Neruda writes about the tyrants he considers the worst, such as Doctor Francia of Paraguay, Rosas of Argentina, and Martínez of El Salvador. In portraying the bloodshed of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Neruda suggests that the people who fought for freedom were denied it soon after their struggles:

No, aún no secaban las banderas,  
aún no dormían los soldados  
cuando la libertad cambió de traje,  
se transformó en hacienda. (“Los Oligarquías” [“The Oligarchies”] 1-4)

No, the flags had not yet dried,  
the soldiers had not yet slept  
when freedom changed clothes  
and was turned into a hacienda.

The people and nature are betrayed. We see this in numerous images of a troubled nature: dying flowers, destroyed tree limbs, betrayed minerals. Nature cringes under the power of Latin American tyrants who institute oligarchies or monopolies, who use “la tinta emputecida” (“prostituted ink”) (“Los validos” [“The Favorites”] 42) to write history:<sup>13</sup>

Ellos se declararon partiotas.  
En los clubs se condecoraron  
y fieron escribiendo la historia.  
Los Parlamentos se llenaron  
de pompa, se repartieron  
despueés la tierra, la ley,  
las mejores calles, el aire,  
la Universidad, los zapatos. (“Promulgación de la Ley del Embudo”  
[“Promulgation of the Funnel Law”] 1-8 )

They declared themselves patriots.  
In the clubs they decorated one another  
and set about writing history.  
Parliaments were filled with pomp.  
Then they divided up  
the land, the law,  
the best streets, air  
the University, shoes.

Neruda states that Latin American history was written by those who betrayed the people. In their histories, they proclaim themselves outstanding citizens and heroes. The histories stake their claims in dividing the countries for themselves, and, as he tells us a few lines later, their divisions received the blessing of the church. Thus, one of the reasons for writing *Canto general* is to redress the tyrants' writing of history. In setting down his own version of history, Neruda can place the poor and working-class people at the center, championing them as heroes and patriots. Like Whitman, Neruda rewrites history for his political agenda. Unlike Whitman who stresses a personal understanding history, Neruda presents a vision of history for the reader to accept.

Besides criticizing the church and Latin American tyrants, Neruda discusses how corporate rule replaced military rule in Latin America; he shows how capitalism is the new religion in Latin America. For example, in "La United Fruit Co." he states:

Cuando sonó la trompeta, estuvo  
todo preparado en la tierra  
y Jehová repartió el mundo  
a Coca-Cola Inc., Anaconda,  
Ford Motors, y otras entidades. (1-5)

When the trumpet blared everything  
on earth was prepared  
and Jehovah distributed the world  
to Coca-Cola Inc., Anaconda,  
Ford Motors and other entities.

The poet says that Jehovah has ceded Latin America's natural resources to the multi-national corporations. The corporations are welcomed by the rulers of Latin America, but they leave the people with little. At the end of this poem, the poet presents images of the people piled up like fruit, like a product to be used by the North American corporations. In considering this takeover by corporations, Neruda fills his poem with bloody images of workers slaughtered; he shows their blood as the seed of a movement and their suffering as a road that the people will travel to freedom.

After *La arena traicionada*, Neruda begins to include himself more as a presence in the work. The "I" becomes more prevalent as Neruda accuses parliament, describes Chile, and journeys into exile. The next section, *América, no invoco tu nombre en vano* (*America, I do not Invoke your Name in Vain*), has the same title as his parliament speech responding to his contempt charges. The section contains a series of short, lyrical poems that portray the desolation of Latin America along with the sense that hope still lies with the people. He suggests that he is filling the desolation, the silence of Latin America, with his songs, which, as he calls them, are songs of brothers. In the title poem of this section, he explains that he was created in the light of the Americas, and because of that, he must work to fix any problems that he finds in the legacy he has been given.

In *Canto general de Chile*, the next section, he continues this theme through an exploration of the plants and people of Chile. He shows the natural beauty of the landscape and the working-class people and claims that he is writing to help change the problems of the poor by inspiring people and acting as a witness. Broken images

pervade this section; he attempts to call the people together so that through unity the problems can be solved.

The next section, *La tierra se llama Juan* (*The Earth's Name is Juan*), continues the theme of needed change, but it acts to build up in the people a desire for change. In this section Neruda presents his encounters with numerous working-class people. Of this section Neruda said, “Está escrito con las mismas palabras del pueblo, con sus faltas y su modo de decir las cosas. Son vidas de trabajadores, contadas por ellos mismos” (“It is written with the very words of the people, with their mistakes and their mode of telling things. There are the lives of workers, recounted by themselves”) (qtd. in Magdalena Sola 106). Neruda replays the conversations of the people, but he also takes on their voices so as to give them life. He has the people tell the struggles of their lives and the things that they need. Through their mouths, he criticizes the tyrants; moreover, he entrusts the workers to give him his charge as a poet: “diga usted, camarada, lo que hace al pueblo el maldito” (“comrade, tell them what the scoundrel’s doing to the people”) (“Luis Cortés” 33). Unlike Whitman, who portrays average Americans through their actions or his experiences of them, Neruda wants to show the people speaking, telling their stories in their own words so that their situations become personalized, so that they are witnesses to their own tortures. For him, this personal aspect of the lyric-epic is an advantage. Through these poems, Neruda shows us images of working-class people in jail or being killed and has them tell us that something needs to change: “no llores, / el mundo tiene demasiadas / lágrimas, hace falta otra cosa” (“don’t cry / the world has too many / tears, something else is needed”) (“Arturo Carrión” 41-43).

In the last poem of this section, the title poem, Neruda presents a typical worker named Juan and uses him to prove how the people will rise no matter what the obstacle:

Detrás de los libertadores estaba Juan  
trabajando, pescando y combatiendo,  
.....  
Sus huesos están en todas partes.  
Pero vives. Regresó de la tierra. Ha nacido.  
.....  
Lo ataron, y es ahora decidido soldado.  
Lo hirieron, y mantiene su salud de manzana.  
.....  
Juan, es tuya la puerta y el camino.  
La tierra  
es tuya, pueblo, la verdad ha nacido  
contigo, de tu sangre.  
No pudieron exterminarte. (1-2, 6-7, 10-11, 14-16)

Juan followed upon the liberators  
working, fishing and fighting,  
.....  
His bones are everywhere.  
But he's alive. He returned from the earth. He was born.  
.....  
They bound him, and he's now a determined soldier.  
They wounded him, and he's still hardly as an apple.  
.....  
Juan, the door and the road are your.  
The earth  
is yours, people, truth was born  
with you, with your blood.  
They couldn't exterminate you.

Juan becomes a symbol for all of those that Neruda has presented in this section and for the poor and working-class of Latin America. He is also symbolic of the progression towards communism. The road image, one likely borrowed from Whitman's "Song of the Open Road," is used throughout this section to suggest the path that the people must follow to liberation, to communism. Neruda's primary focus here is that

communism is born of suffering. No matter what hindrances the people face, they will and must still struggle to achieve a communist society, for progress, while it may appear at times halted, is assured by suffering and death.

*Que despierte el leñador (Let the Woodcutter Awaken)*, the next section, mentions many of the themes of the past sections: the takeover of Latin American institutions by North American capitalists, the harmful nature of the church, the wonders of the Russian people and their communist system; however, the main focus in this section is on *el leñador* (the woodcutter).<sup>14</sup> *El leñador* is symbolic of the people rising up. The poet depicts him:

levante el hacha en su pueblo  
contra los nuevos esclavistas,  
contra el látigo del esclavo,  
contra el veneno de la imprenta,  
contra la mercadería  
sangrienta que quieren vender. (V, 21-26)

heft his people's ax  
against the new slavers,  
against the slave's whip,  
against the poison press,  
against the bloody merchandise  
that they want to sell.

As the image of slaves suggests, *el leñador* is like Lincoln in the Civil War. The North American capitalists are slave owners because of their treatment of Latin American workers. Their merchandise is red with workers' blood. Neruda focuses on the Soviet Union's splendor but asks the poets of the United States to help him to raise *el leñador's* spirit. The one writer he focuses on most specifically here is Whitman:

Qué ves allí, Walt Whitman?  
.....  
Dame tu voz y el peso de tu pecho enterrado,  
Walt Whitman, y las graves

raíces de tu rostro  
para cantar estas reconstrucciones?  
Cantemos juntos lo que se levanta  
de todos los dolores. (III, 53, 63-68)

What do you see there Walt Whitman?

.....  
Give me your voice and the weight of your buried breast,  
Walt Whitman, and the solemn  
roots of your face  
to sing these reconstructions!  
Let's sing together whatever arises  
from all the sorrows.

When the poet asks Whitman what he sees, he is referring to what Whitman sees of the Soviet Union. In other words, Neruda's focusing Whitman's attention on the Soviet Union suggests that Whitman's ideas are also those of the Soviet Union. As Neruda sees the Soviet Union, the people have come together in pure democracy, working together to fill each other's needs. He calls on Whitman to help him sing the wonders of the people because he sees Whitman as having sung the wonders of workers. Plus, Neruda wants to use the person that he considers the United States' best poet to critique the actions of contemporary Americans. For this reason, he also chooses to evoke Lincoln, a person who Neruda considers a hero of the United States. In making his claim that two great people of the United States would have agreed with the Soviet Union, he is attempting to touch what he considers the "fraternal subsuelo ("fraternal subsoil") (III, 206) of the Americas; he states: "Mi hermano Juan vende zapatos / como tu hermano John" ("My brother Juan sells shoes / like your brother John") (III, 209-210). He wants to show the Americas as connected, and by presenting *el leñador* as a combination of figures, some from North America, he can claim a heroic presence that will help all workers. In this section, *el leñador* is a mythic figure, much like a new



patriarch made of average workers who through rising up will create a new society of pure democracy. The biblical quotation from Luke that Neruda adds at the beginning of this section suggests the mythic nature of *el leñador* as well as the biblical action that will take place when he rises.<sup>15</sup>

The next two sections, *El fugitivo* (*The Fugitive*) and *Las flores de Punitaqui* (*The Flowers of Punitaqui*), explore personal experiences with workers and average Latin Americans. *El fugitivo* has Neruda hiding from the government in 1948 after he was brought up on charges. He shows himself as just another fugitive among the workers in the country. In the title poem, he states that he has taken in “la congoja” (“the anguish”) (34) of his country. During his hiding, he learns the people’s strength and understands that they are dependent on him for voice. He writes to those who want to capture him: “Qué puedes tú, maldito, contra el aire” (“What can you do, scoundrel, against the air”) (XI, 1). The people, like the air, are everywhere and are continuing to grow. In *Las flores de Punitaqui*, the people are again shown as natural objects, but in this section the people become flowers that rise through their sorrows. Much of this section describes Neruda’s trips through Chile about 1946, especially his trip to Punitaqui, a gold mine. He tells stories about corporate corruption, the people’s harsh conditions, and their attempts to unionize. He describes a strike, which he suggests is symbolic of the people’s unifying for societal change on a grander scale. A strike, he states, conquers through small steps, much as he argues that societal change does. In the last poem of this section, he encourages the people to rise up and form a communist government.<sup>16</sup>

The next section, *Los ríos del canto* (*The Rivers of Song*), provides a series of dirges for dead Latin American and Spanish poets, but as the title suggests, like Orpheus whose decapitated head kept singing as it floated down river, these poets, who have been killed for political reasons, continue to sing through their songs about the necessity of freedom. In other words, Neruda in this section claims poetry as a weapon in freedom's arsenal, as he says, "Cuchillos, redes, cantos borrarán los dolores" ("Knives, nets, songs will expunge the sorrows") ("A Rafael Alberti" 109). Poets act as witnesses and keep hope alive. The poets were his friends: Miguel Hernández, Rafael Alberti, and Federico García Lorca.

The next section, *Coral de año nuevo para mi patria en tinieblas* (*New Year's Chorale for the Country in Darkness*), is about Chilean politics, like a message from the national poet. This section acts as a summation of contemporary political problems faced by Chileans, but it also stresses the people's spirit. Neruda states that even in exile he will remember his country and that people in other parts of the world will learn about Chile's need for change through his writing. He explains what parts of Chilean politics need to change. In the midst of describing Chile's problems, he uses the phrase *feliz año* (happy year) to suggest hope. Through the period of struggle, some hope exists that the new year he sings will bring change for the people.

The second-to-last section, *El gran océano* (*The Great Ocean*), is a favorite of critics who do not appreciate the political aspects of *Canto general*. Several critics agree with Magdalena Sola in claiming it to be the most beautiful piece of writing ever produced by Neruda (116). Up to this point, Neruda discusses primarily actions and people; the historical progress is clear, but *El gran océano* breaks up, or appears to, this

schema. The main content is a description of the ocean and its force. Neruda describes creatures of the sea, its currents, ships, islands, and people.<sup>17</sup> The ocean is portrayed mythically as a primordial force of unbounded creativity. At times, the ocean appears to be Being, that from which all comes and into which all goes. Camacho Guizado calls this section a “Canto cosmogónico, canto de los orígenes, de los nacimientos” (“Cosmogonic canto, canto of origins, of births”) (179). Connected to this symbol is that of the ocean being the force from which *Canto general* comes. The ocean also is portrayed as the force of the people once they rise up in communism; in the title poem, Neruda names the ocean the “Copa acumulada / de todo movimiento, unidad pura” (“accumulated cup / of all movement, pure unity”) (14-15). The image of pure unity is one associated with communism throughout *Canto general*.

The last section, *Yo soy (I Am)*, describes Neruda’s personal history, from his youth in the frontier area of Chile to his present life. He shows us his father, his student years, and his years traveling in the East as a consular officer. He tells us that as he traveled through the Americas he could feel its nature rise through him. This ascending spirit mirrors his view of communism as a rising star in Latin America. He speaks of his experiences in the Senate:

Encontré la maldad sentada en tribunales:  
en el Senado la encontré vestida  
y peinada, torciendo los debates  
y las ideas hacia los bolsillos. (“Se reúne el acero” [“The Steel Workers”]  
6-9 )

I found evil seated in the courtrooms:  
in the senate I found it dressed  
and groomed, twisting debates  
and ideas towards its pockets.

He states that this experience helped him put away his solitude and learn that unity is needed. In his Nobel speech, he explains, like Gabriel García Márquez, that Latin America is encased in solitude. The answer to this solitude for Neruda is communal action by the people. The people can form a society that will help them participate in a global political climate, but to do that they must first overcome their own desire for solitude and become part of the unity. Like Whitman's direct address, Neruda uses direct address to instill in his reader a sense of unity: "Dame la mano, encuéntrate conmigo" ("Give me your hand, meet me.") ("El vino" ["The Wine"] 20). Also like Whitman, he tells us that he writes for the people, those who only ask for nature's beauties to nourish them, not for biographers or critics:

No escribo para que otros libros me aprisionen  
ni para encarnizados aprendices de lirio,  
sino para sencillos habitantes que piden  
agua y luna. ("La gran alegría" ["The Great Happiness"] 5-8)

I don't write so that other books can imprison me  
or for the passionate apprentices of lilies,  
but for simple inhabitants who request  
water and moon.

The people become the focus of the last few poems, especially his experience of them through the Communist Party. He ends the book noting that he envisions the progress of the poor and working-class through the Communist Party. Essentially, in this last section, he expresses how he has grown to view communism as the savior of the poor and how he encourages common people to embrace it. In the last poem, he explains that *Canto general* is meant to be the common book for all and that it is meant to continue burning in spirit after he stops writing.

## II. History Redeemed

In Hegelian fashion, Neruda demonstrates history as progressing, but while he does show the founding of communist societies as inevitable, he believes that progress comes through struggle. Using Engel's image from the *Communist Manifesto*, Neruda portrays communism as a phantom or spectre that is haunting Latin America.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Whitman and many North Americans, Neruda does not connect progress to technological progress. Since he views Latin America as left behind in terms of technology, he connects progress primarily to natural images, which he uses to show that progress in Latin America will be organic growth. The most important of these images are seeds, flowers, trees, soil/earth, blood, sand, and stone. Seeds are an especially prominent symbol in the work. In the poems, the spilt blood of the people is called a seed from which communism will rise. Tyrannical deeds are said to have left seeds from which redemption will arise. In several poems, seeds are portrayed as the people.<sup>19</sup> At the end of *Canto general*, Neruda presents communism as fruit from the people's seed. Deeds performed against the people are shown as hurting the natural world. Like the seed, they have to be redeemed, and also like the seed, the memory of their occurrence is the beginning of redemption. This redemption is symbolized for Neruda in the red of the Soviet Union's flag.

The vital theme of redemption informs the second half of *Canto general*, for those poor and working-class members who have fallen must be saved. Neruda attempts to redeem them partially by providing witness to them, by writing an alternate history in which they figure as central. He portrays the pain of common people as perishing in the establishment of communist governments.

Neruda once said of his task in *Canto general*, “To unite our continent, to discover it, to build it, that was my purpose” (qtd. in Santí’s “*Canto general*” 258). He also said that *Canto general* was “a great unity to the world” (qtd. in Santí’s “*Canto General*” 258). Providing the people with a sense of unity is an important aspect of *Canto general*, for only in unity can a people achieve freedom and only in freedom is there redemption. Neruda attempts to build Latin America by giving it names in literature and by providing it with its own sense of literature. By furnishing Latin Americans with a myth of communist progression and showing them the horrid deeds of contemporary rulers, Neruda hopes that the people will rise up to change the government. Like Whitman, he believes that poetry can influence change in a society. Thus, Neruda attempts to use literary history as a means to liberation. Through our stories, we can provide witness and create paradigms to live by. For Neruda, the ultimate paradigm is communism, as he says, “Really politically now one can only be a Communist or an anticommunist. The rest of the doctrines have been falling apart and deteriorating” (qtd. in Ortega 5).

Despite the contemporary irrelevance of Neruda’s politics, he does create a myth of politics for the reader, much like Dante or the Bible. He creates a literary landscape in which to read the history that he presents, and he tells us how we should view the landscape. In many ways, Whitman does the same. What Neruda took from Whitman was a framework for writing about the people, but after he took it, he placed Latin American characters in the position of the people and provided more specific figures to read about. As Neruda was instituting a new form of government and Whitman was praising a form of government already instituted, Neruda’s naming of specific

enemies/tyrants is his attempt to overthrow them, even if only in literature. Dante does the same in the *Divine Comedy*.

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have my verses which are / more powerful than your dagger.

<sup>2</sup> Do not renounce the day given to you / by those who died struggling. (my trans.)

<sup>3</sup> Marx presents history from a European perspective. As he mentions in the *Communist Manifesto*, he assumes that communism will start to take hold in industrialized nations since industrialism is a step in the progression towards having the means to satisfy need, a step essential to communism. Neruda, however, tries to instigate communism in poor countries. As much as he dislikes Mao Tse-tung, his version of communism has more in common with that of Mao than that of Marx.

<sup>4</sup> Eugenia Neves argues that Neruda's entire task in *Canto general* is to create history for Latin America ("Pablo Neruda" 1).

<sup>5</sup> Enrico Santí discusses *Canto general* as a biblical work.

<sup>6</sup> The image of the "gota" repeats another 18 times in the work, and the symbol of red is used at least 58 times.

<sup>7</sup> Since Neruda has anti-religious ideals, at least in terms of divinity, he does not mention the numerous religious figures in Latin American history, figures who helped to protect native groups. As with any version of history, Neruda left out elements, and through his portrayal of the church, he presents only the negatives.

<sup>8</sup> The Araucanians, unlike the Incans and Aztecs, were difficult to battle because they had no centralized governments. Like many North American tribes, they were nomadic; thus, eliminating all of them was impossible. Also, since they were fierce fighters, they put up more resistance than did many Latin American tribes.

<sup>9</sup> My trans.

<sup>10</sup> Much of Neruda's portrayal of the Amerindians is from his reading of Ercilla.

<sup>11</sup> Note the influence of Whitman. Neruda takes Whitman's image of the tree and its leaves and changes it. For Whitman, the leaves are poems written by the democratic individual. For Neruda, the leaves become the people themselves, who are like the leaves created through the poem of communism.

<sup>12</sup> Neruda was the campaign manager for González Videla. Once in power, González Videla did not keep many of his campaign promises, and his actions led Neruda to criticize him publicly in the parliament. These events led to Neruda's trial for contempt and his eventual exile.

<sup>13</sup> In this study's sixth chapter Neruda's "Los poetas celestes" ("Celestial Poets"), a poem in which he berates most poets for being "pálidas lombrices del queso / capitalista" ("pale worms of capitalist / cheese") (8-9), for not writing about the horrific events in the world, was discussed. This poem is placed also in this section, which signals it as a poem of betrayal. Neruda believes that poets who do not defend life in poetry betray their craft.

<sup>14</sup> Neruda praises Stalin highly in this and other sections. He was not fully aware of Stalin's ruthless nature and his horrendous actions, even though the Great Purge happened in the 1930s, years before *Canto general* was completed.

<sup>15</sup> The quotation reads: "And as for you, Capernaum, 'Will you be exalted to heaven? You will go down to the underworld'" (*Luke* 10, 15).

<sup>16</sup> Besides the major historical schema, each section builds up to its last poem, as if each section is a wave mounting to its crest. Thus, the sections imitate the small actions that will eventually build up to a communist revolution.

<sup>17</sup> Neruda grew up with the Pacific Ocean. Throughout his life he was a collector of ocean items, such as ship's figureheads and shells. He donated his shell collection, which was impressive, to the University of Chile before he died.

<sup>18</sup> See the poems "Benilda Varela" and "Las oligarquías" ("The Oligarchies").

<sup>19</sup> See "Llegará el día" ("The Day Will Come").



## Chapter 9: Neruda and Poetics

En cada época, un bardo assume la totalidad de los sueños y de la sabiduría: expresa el crecimiento, la expansión del mundo. Se llama un vez Alighieri, o Victor Hugo, o Lope de Vega o Walt Whitman.<sup>1</sup>  
Neruda (*Obras IV* 1197)

In an essay written late in life, Pablo Neruda remarked of Whitman, “Su intención no fue otra que cantar, para imponer sobre otros su propia visión total y amplia de las relaciones de los hombres y de las naciones” (“His intention was not only to sing, but to invest others with his vast and total vision of the relationships of human beings and nations”) (*Obras IV* 745). Neruda’s statement could be applied to himself as well, for like Whitman in his attempt to create democratic readers, Neruda intended to fashion communist readers through *Canto general*; thus, like Whitman, Neruda’s endeavor was creative for both reader and writer. For Neruda, as the epigraph to this chapter shows, the best writers help shape and lead their societies to grow, and they chronicle that growth as it occurs. Neruda envisioned himself as a scribe of Latin American communism. For him, this political ideology was a step in the evolution of Western politics. For radical change to occur, Neruda asserts that poets must be present to prepare the people for that evolution. Like Whitman and Trotsky, Neruda believes that the people must be ready for a new form of government; a poet can help in preparing them. Poets and other writers can create a sourcebook for the beliefs of a political ideology. Whitman attempts this task in *Leaves of Grass*, and Neruda follows his example in *Canto general*. Neruda took what he sees as Whitman’s start and tries to write a work that will influence the people; however, like Whitman, he realizes that he must teach the reader to read his text a certain way. In other words, he has to teach one to read in communist fashion in the process of teaching one to be a communist.

For readers of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, this task of reading differently was clear—the form and style was different than anything they knew. With Neruda's *Canto general*, the reader is prepared to read differently not primarily from the form, although it does resemble the form of *Leaves of Grass*, but from the first lines. Neruda starts at genesis in Latin America and works forward historically; thus, he presents first creation and then guides the reader through a world that he creates entirely; this tactic allows him to introduce new ideas or reading styles as part of our awareness of a new world. In this fashion, Neruda hopes that the reader will actualize the text, in much the same way that Whitman hoped that his reader would actualize *Leaves of Grass*, for then *Canto general* would be a song sung *for* and *by* everyone. To achieve his task he assumes that he must empower the people with a new mythology, canceling out colonized history and educational practices of the West.

### I. Poetic Actualization

To convince the reader to adopt a communist ideology, Neruda must persuade the reader to actualize the text that he or she is reading. In other words, the reader must take an active role in reading instead of passively accepting a narrative. James Nolan argues that Neruda prepares the readers to reject past literature and inaugurate a new type of literature with the first lines (44): “Antes de la peluca y la casaca / fueron los ríos, ríos arteriales” (“Before the wig and the dress coat / there were rivers, arterial rivers”) (“Amor América” 1-2). Nolan recognizes that Neruda dismisses the customs of Europe with these lines; these lines also signal a challenge for the reader: the need to change worldviews. From the start, Neruda attempts to prepare the reader to experience something that is different from past texts, but this first genesis or

awakening, while essential to his project on its own, would not cause the reader to participate actively. Much like Whitman, Neruda must develop a connection between the reader and the poet in order to involve the reader. Sometimes he does this by invoking the reader as “you”; sometimes he claims that he is writing for the reader, expressing the reader’s ideas; sometimes he presents bloody scenes that are so horrific that it is difficult not to empathize with the poet who describes them; sometimes he stresses fraternity; and sometimes he claims to be part of the countries that he is describing.

One of the crucial elements in this connection is the role of “I” and “you” in the text. Often Neruda addresses the reader as “you”; he uses the second person, like Whitman, to create a sense of dialogue, as if he is answering the reader’s questions: “Me habéis preguntado . . .” (“You’ve asked me . . .”) (“Los enigmas” 1), and “Queréis saber . . .” (“Do you want to know . . .”) (“Los Enigmas” 13)—such phrases abound in the text, pulling the reader in close. The first person is often used in a similar fashion to respond to the hypothetical questions of the reader: “Yo os quiero decir . . .” (“I want to tell you . . .”) (“Los enigmas” 17). The “I” responds in conversational tone, as if to suggest that the reader should take up the conversation. Throughout the text, as in *Leaves of Grass*, there appears to be a running commentary between the poet and the reader, no matter how many other “yous” and “Is” people the text. Neruda makes reader a participant in the dialogue of history. Like Whitman, Neruda also announces that he is writing for the poets of the future: “Dejo mis viejos libros . . . a los que un día / hilarán en el ronco eltar interrumpido / las significaciones de mañana” (“I leave my old

books . . . to those who'll / one day weave tomorrow's meanings / on the raucous interrupted loom") ("Testamento" ["Testament"] 1, 4-6).

Neruda writes for the reader and for future creators, for he wants his work to be actualized in future communists. In the last poem he says about *Canto general*, "deseo / que continue como un árbol rojo / propagando su clara quemadura" ("I hope / that it continues like a red tree / propagating its transparent burn") (3-5). He hopes that the work will live and give off seeds to continue growing. As with *Leaves of Grass*, procreation/propagation images abound in *Canto general*, from the beginning genesis to the growth of the Communist Party near the end. He evokes an almost biblical command to go forth and create other communists.

Besides taking on the role of a participant in a dialogue, the "I" is used as a guide. This theme is presented early in *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* (*The Heights of Macchu Picchu*), the poem in which Neruda claims the sacred right to be poet of the people and in so doing, to craft the new myth of Latin America with *Canto general*. He becomes the person who can tell the story that others want to tell but cannot, and in performing the task, he acts as a guide for the reader. This role of poet as guide works well in *Canto general*, for new history requires a guide. Much as Dante has a double layer of pilgrim and poet whom we follow through the divine realm, Neruda presents a double: one persona is that of the poet guiding us through a new Latin American history; the other is that of the poet experiencing and playing witness to the events. As a guide, Neruda presents an "I" that engages in dialogue with the reader and who chronicles the basic facts of the story.

The poet as witness becomes more evident in later portions of *Canto general* as Neruda starts to tell of his travels throughout Latin America and especially his time in Chile. Neruda uses the poet as witness to reveal the harsh actions perpetrated on the people in the past, but more than that, the replaying of events is meant to cause the reader to rise up to defend the people in the present and to redeem the past. The role of the “I” as a guide adds another layer to that position. Neruda can teach the reader how to read the events that he is presenting. For example, a ruler’s shift in political ideologies after election might not be read as a betrayal in a solitary work. After all, once in place, an elected official can easily change positions when accorded actual power; however, a poem about such an event in the middle of a section entitled *La arena traicionada* (*The Sand Betrayed*) surrounded by poems concerning betrayal is by context intended to be read in a certain fashion. Neruda intends to teach the reader how to read such events by the context.<sup>2</sup> By showing the reader how the “I” responds to the events, Neruda also creates empathy for the poet’s sentiments. Theoretically, the poet’s feelings will be transferred to the reader, and thus the reader will be tied to the text by the shared experience of trauma. This interconnection is often especially reinforced since the other persona is that of dialogue partner expecting a response from the reader.

Along with connecting the reader to the text through the position of “I” and “you,” the camaraderie that Neruda invokes is intended to pull the reader into the position of one who becomes a creative member in the communist struggle. Camaraderie is a major aspect of the work; not only does Neruda want to gather the people together as a unity to struggle for communist government, but his focus on camaraderie draws the

reader into the text. As with his use of the second person, the use of *hermano* (brother) or *camarada* (comrade) fosters a sense of personal dialogue with the reader so that the reader becomes one who takes part in the creation of the mythology, the history that he or she is reading. In actualizing what the writer has written, the reader reads the text. Whereas Whitman's actualized reader is democratic, Neruda's actualized reader is a communist. The poet gives the reader the language for communism as well as the language for Latin American history.<sup>3</sup>

The historical structure also is used in encouraging reader participation in the text. With the text's lyric-epic format, there are many historical gaps. Unlike a history textbook where the narrative is clear, the poet does not bother to provide transitions from one period to the next. Numerous years are skipped without any mention, and the narrative that we do read is punctuated with holes since it is in lyric format. These historical gaps and narrative holes allow/force the reader to take an active role in understanding the history presented. While the narrative does connect loosely throughout the work, the individual poems do not always connect in a clear manner, which causes the reader to try to construct a framework in which to read the works. The reader takes a position next to the poet in creating a story. Neruda believed that *Canto general* had to radiate outwards in Latin American society for it to create changes. For his version of Latin American mythology to take hold in the reader, the reader has to internalize the mythology through a process of creating it. Neruda believes, as the epigraph suggests, that the poet sums up the totality of his society's dreams and helps the reader understand those dreams and thus moves the society forward in making the dreams reality. Neruda calls Whitman the first total poet because he believes that

Whitman succeeded in summing up the dreams of U.S. citizens. Since Neruda believes that the singular dream of Latin Americans must be communism, whether they understand it or not, he tries to help forward that dream through writing *Canto general*.<sup>4</sup>

Neruda also asks the reader to rise up or take action many times in the work, especially in *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* (*The Heights of Macchu Picchu*); *América, no invoco tu nombre in vano* (*America, I do not Invoke Your Name in Vain*); *Que despierte el leñador* (*Let the Woodcutter Awaken*); and *Yo soy* (*I am*). He wants the reader to join him in creating communist societies. He tells the reader, “Yo vine aquí para cantar / y para que cantes conmigo” (“I came here to sing / so that you’d sing with me”) (“Paz para los crepúsculos” [“Peace for the Coming Twilights”] 65-66). Neruda presents himself as writing *Canto general* so that those who read it will help create its vision. To do this they must take part in creating, in singing, the poem.

Neruda has often been called a nature poet, and natural images do abound to suggest that the connection between the poet and the reader is natural and will produce good results. Like Whitman and probably from Whitman, Neruda uses the images of a tree bearing leaves; he likens his poems to leaves (*hojas*).<sup>5</sup> He uses seed imagery to stand for the growth of his writing and to symbolize the blood of the fallen who will be redeemed in communist societies. He uses the symbols of bread and stone for the needs of the people. Words are rough like stone and provide sustenance like bread. Bread is an appropriate symbol since Neruda shows many Latin Americans as going hungry. He complains about tyrants who hold back bread, but he also suggests that poetry is like bread—something needed. With the soil/earth he invokes the place from which his writing comes, whereas he portrays the tyrants of Latin American and

conquistadors as rapists of the soil/earth. Essentially, he calls forth nature to act as persuader. In the dialogue between reader and poet, to disagree with the poet in the poem's context is to disagree with nature, with trees, with seeds, with soil. To disagree is to place yourself in the position of rapist, murder, or betrayer. The choice is not hard to make. He asks the reader to participate actively in reading, in understanding Latin American history, but he carefully guides the reading through contextual dialogue.

## II. Poetry and Action

Like Muriel Rukeyser and Denise Levertov, Neruda envisions poetry as a defense of life. He expresses this clearly in his book *España en el corazón* (*Spain in Our Hearts*) and echoes it numerous times in *Canto general*, perhaps most forcefully in “Los poetas celestes” (“Celestial Poets”) in which he calls poets who do not defend life fainthearted and blind. This belief in poetry's power is something that Neruda learned in Spain. As Amado Alonso notes, before Spain Neruda's poetry was hermetic (41). His early works are often called surreal or unrealistic—they consist of, among other things, love poems and melancholy pieces. In his memoir, *Confieso que he vivido*, Neruda describes his struggle not to be a self-absorbed poet. After seeing bloodshed in Spain and then touring through Latin America, Neruda came to think that poetry must defend life, that poets who did not are dishonoring their professions. In the prologue for *Poesía política de Pablo Neruda* (*Pablo Neruda's Political Poetry*), he wrote:

The road of poetry goes outside, through streets and factories, listens at all the doors of the exploited, runs and warns, whispers and congregates, menaces with the heavy voice of the future. It is in all human struggles, in all combats, in all the bells announcing the world that is being born, because with strength, with hope, with tenderness and with hardness we will make it to be born. (qtd. in Ortega 6)



This quotation stresses themes about poetry already discussed, i.e. it helps announce the future world, it provides witness so that the future can redeem horrid deeds, and it engages in contemporary life. In *Confieso que he vivido*, he states, “El honor de la poesía fue salir a la calle, fue tomar parte en éste y en el otro combate . . . La vida sobrepasa las estructuras” (“Poetry’s honor has been to go out into the street, to take part in this or that combat . . . Life overcomes all structures”) (402). Both of these passages show Neruda’s belief that poets should take part in social action—poets must go into the streets; poets must defend life because it is more important than anything else.

In order to pull the reader into the poem’s conflicts in order to actualize the text, Neruda relies most on bloody images. In the first poem of the bloodiest section, *La arena traicionada* (*The Sand Betrayed*), he explains why he presents such images:

Por eso te hablaré de estos dolores que quisiera apartar,  
te obligaré a vivir una vez más entre sus quemaduras,  
no para deternernos como en una estación, al partir,  
.....  
sino para caminar conociendo. (13-15, 18)

I’ll tell you these sorrows I’d like to put aside,  
I’ll oblige you to live among their burns again,  
not to mark time as in a terminal, before departing,  
.....  
but to set forth knowing.

In reading horrific passages, Neruda suggests that one can (re)live them; the reader does more than watch them pass by as a marking of time. Through living these actions the reader can gain knowledge that he or she can later use. Experiencing the bloody scenes—rapes, betrayals, mass murder, grueling labor—is intended to evoke feelings of empathy from the reader; the reader, like the poet, will be appalled by human cruelty

and will want to stop such actions. This reaction is heightened by the number of bloody scenes. Instead of presenting only a few instances, the lyric and fractured narrative format allows Neruda to explode the text with numerous acts of cruelty. While it might be possible for the reader to dismiss one instance of tyranny and bloodshed, it is difficult for the reader to reject all of them, especially in a context of overall betrayal. Neruda uses the examples of betrayal, of bloodshed, to spur the reader to action.

In the midst of the bloodiest sections, Neruda presents communism as a solution. Those who stand up to the tyrants are the people or communist heroes. The poet even has tyrants condemn communism. For example, in “Promulgación de la ley del embudo” (“Promulgation of the Funnel Law”) a corrupt leader states:

Sólo los comunistas, venidos  
del infierno, como se sabe,  
pueden discutir este código  
del Embudo, sabio y severo. (39-42)

Only the communists, conceived  
in hell, as you're well aware,  
could object to the Funnel  
code, sagacious and severe.

Placed in the middle of a section dealing with betrayal, the reference to the communists is not negative. The situation sets up the tyrants versus the communists, and the reader is given a choice as to which side to join. After a presentation of the law as corrupt (which happens earlier in the poem), the person who is arguing for the law appears corrupt. Also, since *La arena traicionada* is filled with examples of a corrupt church, it is difficult for the reader to take as a serious charge the reference of communists being conceived in hell. The reader, who has already read about communists standing up for the rights of the downtrodden, is left to choose between the

communist and bloody tyrants. The choice is obvious, and in this fashion, Neruda attempts to create communist readers. As Whitman shows the blessings of diversity by presenting various peoples in a good light, Neruda does the same for communism. The basic charge the book leaves us with is that we can either be a communist or a supporter of tyranny.

Neruda also singles out as heroes—there is no one hero, unless you count the poet—the working-class or the poor. This ploy is another move to pull the reader into his work. Since he wants to motivate the people to rise up and create communist governments, he fashions as his heroes those who are reading the book. The poet dramatizes events involving people like themselves so that he can create a connection between what they are reading and their lives. This aspect of the work is especially clear in *La tierra se llama Juan* (*The Earth's Name is Juan*), for in this section Neruda takes on the voices of workers who are dead or have been hurt. By appropriating the “I” of the workers, he tells their stories from their own voices in such a way as to place them in the dialogue. Neruda portrays them as talking to him, calling him comrade and brother, talking to him in the second person. It is as if the reader overhears the dead calling him or her to action. The poet has placed the call for redemption in the mouths of those slain workers whose lost lives need to be redeemed. Along with this sense of connection between the reader and the text is the theme that the blood of brutalized workers will rise in the living. In trying to connect text with reader, Neruda tells of the need to write about horrific events and notes that the reader should rise up in a communist society to protect the people and fulfill their needs. In other words, after presenting the reader with heroes like themselves and images of life ravaged by tyrants,

Neruda claims that the blood shed will resurrect the living, i.e. those reading; the reader will internalize the communist ideology and then create communist societies.

Along with showing the heroes as common people, Neruda presents his poetry as coming from the people and the land. In *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, Neruda claims to be the people's poet, a claim which he stresses in many poems. For example, in "La tierra se llama Juan," he has a worker say, "diga usted, camarada, lo que hace al pueblo el maldito" ("comrade, tell them what the scoundrel's doing to the people") (32). Here a worker gives Neruda the charge to be the people's poet. He must report the evil doings of the tyrants, yes, but he must do it in a special way, using the language of the people. He claims this privilege as the foundation for *Canto general* and often reminds us that he wants to use the language of the people. For example, in "Poets of the People," "I have always wanted the hands of the people to be seen in poetry" (*Passions* 138). When he writes poems about his stay with common people during his period in hiding, he tells what he learned from the people. Since the people are portrayed in *Canto general* as natural or as coming from nature uncorrupted, the language that they teach Neruda is from nature. He stresses this numerous times in the text; he uses words like stone, trees, leaves, soil, etc . . . . to describe the people and their actions. He even suggests in one poem, "Acuso" ("I accuse") that the people and nature protect his words, his poems, from tyrannical rulers who attempt to erase them. He states in this poem that night and people erase any libel brought against him. His claim for the origin of his words is an attempt to further the reader's belief in his communist vision. Like Whitman who uses divinity at times as a final step in his argument, Neruda uses nature, as if to suggest that the reader cannot argue since to argue would be to propose

that we should act unnaturally. In claiming the people and nature as his sources, Neruda tries to strengthen his argument for creating a new Latin American myth. He is, he would have us believe, crafting a version of history from the soil where it took place. In this fashion, he can dismiss other versions as biased; moreover, he does not limit his focus only to Latin America or to Chile; rather, he includes all of the Americas. He considers himself writing a new mythology for all working-class people.<sup>6</sup>

Neruda stresses that his poetry should create social change. Like Whitman, he believes that poetry can actually change society, and also like Whitman, Neruda believes that poetry is a necessity for the growth of a society. For Neruda, the poet chronicles events and in chronicling helps to shape the future. Also, the poet must work for change if it is required. The poet must act when wrongs are done; Neruda attempts to impart this same attitude to the reader. He tells us that the poet's language comes from the place where that poet grows, so the poet must protect life especially in that place and must use language to effect society's betterment. For Neruda, the poet exists through language given by his society, and he must create with that language, the same language the people would use if they vocalized their feelings. On a symbolic level, several critics have noted how Neruda's biblical language intones the necessity for change. For example, Enrico Mario Santí sees the work moving from creation to fall to redemption.<sup>7</sup> For the readers to follow this schema, they must, according to Neruda, realize communism as redemption. Thus, to complete the schema they must change their current political systems for communism. Neruda's ideas are similar to Walter Benjamin's in *The Arcades Project*, in which Benjamin states, "Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow, but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening" (13). For

Neruda, the poet is instrumental in dreaming the future and thus in creating it. The reader by actualizing the dream through reading helps to create its fulfillment, or at least this is what Neruda hopes.

Marjorie Agosin suggests that Neruda also hopes that his rewriting of history and the poetic tradition will help educate the people so as to debunk their notions of colonial history and colonial education (60). Like Whitman, Neruda often rejects European literary heirs. In several instances he portrays corrupt priests and rulers touting the benefits of Western culture; he sees this cultural legacy as an aid in exploiting the common people.<sup>8</sup> Neruda wants to replace what he views as colonial education with a system rooted in Latin America. He suggests that he has made a start on such a tradition in *Canto general*. He remarks of the work that it covers “the greater space in which all lives and people move, create and die” (qtd. in Santí’s *Pablo Neruda* 712). Whitman intended to create the democratic individual through reading, to give him or her a paradigm or a new bible to use as a source. Neruda attempts a similar project in *Canto general*, hoping that the reader in becoming a communist through reading will have a new mythological sourcebook, a new bible from which to create future communist societies. Thus, he would like to replace colonial texts with indigenously produced sourcebooks from which to educate the common people.<sup>9</sup>

### III. Neruda's Use of Whitman

Neruda understands Whitman’s attempt at presenting the reader with an educative totality; moreover, he believes that Whitman’s spirit permeates writing in the Americas, as he states in the “Vengo a renegociar mi deuda con Walt Whitman” (“We Live in a Whitmanesque Age”):

Continuamos viviendo una era whitmanesca, viendo como nuevos hombres y nuevas sociedades surgen y crecen, a pesar de sus dolores de parto. La queja del bardo sobre la poderosa influencia de Europa de la cual la literatura de su época continuó obteniendo su sustento. En verdad él, Walt Whitman, fue el protagonista de una verdadera personalidad geográfica: el primer hombre de la historia en hablar con auténtica voz americana continental, en sustentar un auténtico nombre americano. Las colonias de los países más brillantes ha dejado un legado de siglos de silencio: el colonialismo parece matar las fertilidad y embrutecer el poder de creación. (*Obras IV* 745)

We are still living in a Whitmanesque epoch; in spite of painful birth pains, we are witnessing the emergence of new men and new societies. The bard complained of the all-powerful European influence that continued to dominate the literature of his time. In fact, it was he, Walt Whitman, in the persona of a specific geography, who for the first time in history brought honor to an American name. The colonialism of the most brilliant nations created centuries of silence; colonialism seems to stultify creativity.

Whitman wrote in an age of a new society and intended his writing to foster the emerging governmental system. He believes that while old literary forms contain the European hierarchies that helped to create them, new forms encourage new systems and should grow organically from the poet's experience of his or her environment. Neruda agrees, but he views Whitman as already having started a literature in the Americas; Whitman honored the "American name" by fleshing out new forms—he broke out of the silence of colonialism that reigned in the United States. Neruda wants to do the same for Latin America, as he phrases the task of the Latin American writer in his Nobel Prize speech: "Hacia la ciudad espléndida," "Necesitamos colmar de palabras los confines de un continente mudo y nos embriaga esta tarea de fabular y de nombrar" ("We must fill with words the distant places in a silent continent and we are intoxicated by the task of making fables and giving names") (26). Latin America has been silent under colonial influence and needs new voices. Seeing Whitman's work as both American and as democratic, Neruda uses the format of *Leaves of Grass* as a paradigm

for *Canto general*. Like Whitman, he employs traditional epic techniques, such as the invocation, the epic goals, the epic catalogue, a bardic tone, and biblical rhythms. Also, following Whitman he uses an episodic structure for the narrative; a clear narrative thread runs through numerous unconnected scenes. Also, noting Whitman's break from the line, Neruda does not use traditional forms; rather, like Whitman he bases his line breaks on sound. His poems are all different. With Whitman the difference points to the poem's individuality, whereas for Neruda the focus is more on the parts adding up to a unity, a oneness. With Whitman most of the poems are concerned with his experience, whereas Neruda tells his own story primarily near the end. Whitman believes that American poets should write in the people's language, capturing the essence of their lives and their places. Neruda suggests a similar idea, stating that poetry should be "gastada como por ácido por los deberes de la mano, penetrada por el sudor y el humo" ("corroded, as if by acid, by the labors of man's hand, pervaded by sweat and smoke") (*Obras II* 1040). Remnants of the people's touch should show in the poet's language.

Neruda used Whitman's work as a paradigm, but he does not slavishly follow it without deviation.<sup>10</sup> For example, Whitman stresses fact over symbol, and while Neruda does argue in many of his prose pieces that the poet should be a realist, he uses many more symbols in his work than Whitman does. Also, while Whitman uses the "I" as primarily one individual, Neruda's use of the "I" shifts from the poet's persona to numerous figures throughout the work. The shifting of the "I" helps to create a chorus effect, as if we hear a story of pain from more than one perspective. Considering that Neruda attempts a general song instead of an individual-based work, this choral effect is necessary. This does not mean that the "I" of the poet is less important in Neruda's



work. Like Whitman, Neruda intends to level any differences between the poet and any other person. In his Nobel Prize speech, he stresses this fact:

El poeta no es un “pequeño dios.” No, no es un “pequeño dios.” No está signado por un destino cabalístico superior al de quienes ejercen otros menesteres y oficios. A menudo expresé que el mejor poeta es el hombre que nos entrega el pan de cada día. (*Hacia la ciudad espléndida* 22)

The poet is not a ‘little god.’ No, he is not a ‘little god.’ He is not picked out by a mystical destiny in preference to those who follow other crafts and professions. I have often maintained that the best poet is he who prepares our daily bread.

And while Neruda uses repetition and a bardic tone, the structure of the poems is different from *Leaves of Grass*. Neruda takes the basic format and intent of Whitman’s work and molds it into a form he finds suitable.

Like Whitman in the United States, Neruda envisions himself as bringing something new into the tradition of Latin American literature. Many contemporary Latin American writers view his work as foundational. For him, Latin American writing differs from Spanish writing in its locale and the experience of the writers. Creating a new work with new myths and names, one that is filled with the common language of Latin American, is Neruda’s attempt at breaking the silence of Latin America under colonialism. Through such a work, Neruda believes that people will be pulled together; essentially Neruda views himself as the poet of his period—the one who can sum up the dreams of the age. However, like Whitman, Neruda does not want his poetry to be considered original or unique. He intends future poets to be spawned using his text as a paradigm for creating new Latin American works. At the end of *Canto general*, he states, “Yo tengo frente a mí solo semillas” (“I’m facing nothing but seeds”) (“La vida”

["Life"] 26). He considers his work as a mother plant that will provide seeds for a new tradition to grow.

In inviting new poets to sprout from his work and in using techniques that he believes will create the encyclopedic atmosphere of a general song, a song that includes all people and professions, Neruda attempts to teach his readers a poetics while they are reading his poems. Unlike Whitman who had to confront hostile critical and public reception of his work because of form, Neruda did not worry about the form being accepted—that problem had been overcome by earlier writers. Neruda hopes to pull all readers in by being inclusive; this is a reason the lyric-epic form works well for him since he is trying to be a poet of all people. The lyric-epic format allows him to write about the entire Americas and to suggest that the advent of communism is a great moment in the history of American society.

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> In each epoch, one bard assumes the totality of dreams and knowledge, expresses the growth, the expansion of the world. His name is once Alighieri, or Victor Hugo, or Lope de Vega, or Walt Whitman.

<sup>2</sup> J.L. Austin states that the context always determines language use, and this type of controlled interpretation is part of most literary texts; however, Neruda intends the reading context to extend past the text into the reader's life. In other words, he expects the reader to learn how to read life in a communist fashion, i.e. in terms of the people's need.

<sup>3</sup> As pointed out in the last chapter, Neruda views language itself as creative. Ernesto Grassi discusses this topic in "The Originary Quality of the Poetic and Rhetorical Word: Heidegger, Ungaretti, and Neruda." Neruda was fond of saying that Latin America was created by poets; he attempts to take part in the development of Latin America through writing *Canto general*.

<sup>4</sup> As José Ortega notes, Neruda views poetry as a social product (6). The language that the poet uses comes from his or her social position, and the poetry that a poet writes is engaged in the poet's social situation.

<sup>5</sup> Like the English “leaves,” *hoja* means a leaf as well as a sheet of paper.

<sup>6</sup> As much as Neruda criticizes North Americans in *Canto general*, he is quick to claim that the common people and the writers of North America do not agree with those in power. Thus, he encourages North Americans to support communism because that will ease the transition to communism in Latin America. This reason lies behind his invoking U.S. citizens to heed Whitman, for he thinks that Whitman can teach them about pure democracy and freedom, which for Neruda would be communism.

<sup>7</sup> See *Pablo Neruda: The Poetics of Prophecy*.

<sup>8</sup> Like Whitman, Neruda exaggerates his claim of dumping past literary heirs. Many times he suggests the importance of European writers, and the forms that he uses as well as the forms that he dismisses, the Bible, for example, are Western. His claims for other sources besides Western sources are a rhetorical move to attempt to boost the importance of Latin America on its own. He cannot claim any knowledge of Amerindian sources. Even when he does, as Nolan states, he shows his ignorance of actual native practices (15).

<sup>9</sup> Whitman as well made the claim that he was writing an original American literature because European works contained hierarchical structures that are damaging to democratic thought. Neruda believes that European works contain colonial hierarchies that inhibit Latin Americans from communist progress.

<sup>10</sup> Neruda did not write nearly as many prose pieces on his ideas of poetry as Whitman. What he did write is brief, and he makes sure to mention that he does not want to theorize. He claims that he is anti-theoretical. Understanding his poetics must be done primarily through reading his texts since they are augmented only slightly by his prose pieces.

## Conclusion

I sat studying at the feet of the great masters,  
Now if eligible O that the great masters might return and study me.  
Whitman ("Starting from Paumanok" 4, 6-7)

Some critics suggest that there have been no poetic epics in the Americas; however, these critics either consider the novel as the new epic form—and there is no doubt that the novel is one container of epic seeds—or they are waiting for a traditional epic to be written by a contemporary poet. The few attempts to write an epic close to classical epics in the Americas have failed; take, for example, *The Columbiad*. The epic as a traditional form is no longer valid for contemporary poets, but the spirit of the epic is still alive in the works of present-day poets, and that is what Whitman and Neruda tapped into to produce their lyric-epics. Moreover, after looking at Whitman's and Neruda's texts, we can make some observations about the need for the lyric-epic in the Americas, and we can also understand what Neruda's and Whitman's poems reveal about the epic spirit in Latin and Anglo America.

The introduction mentioned the history of epic in the Americas and told why Neruda and Whitman wanted to write epics, but here further observations can be offered. First, many writers in the Americas have felt a need for a shared history, for a mythology that could tie into coherent countries the various different immigrant groups. A shared mythology helps stabilize a community or region. After and during colonization, an urgent need for stability was evident in the Americas. For Neruda, this aspect of the epic was essential to his project because of the fractured nature of Latin American politics at the time. Since Whitman's goal was to solidify democracy in the United States, Neruda could use his work as an example. Second, having one's own

literature is a sign of independence. In other words, the creation of a native literature can be a means of moving from under colonial power to defining oneself through one's own literature. Many writers in the Americas, like Whitman and Neruda, felt that major literature before their periods was primarily European, as if to suggest that countries that wield more power globally produce better literature. By writing a native literature, writers in the Americas were making a statement, albeit unconsciously in some cases, for literary and political independence from colonial powers. Both Neruda and Whitman discuss these concerns in their prose. Third, cultural outlooks were evolving along with rapid changes in society including urbanization and a radical expansion in energy sources, means of transportation and communication, weaponry, and medicine. At the same time, populations in Anglo and Latin America were rising rapidly through immigration. With all of these changes, writers went to the epic to create a myth of shared culture for their societies. The societies were changing so rapidly that writers wanted to help define the national identities. Fourth, with the founding of governmental systems, there had to be works supportive of those systems. Both Neruda and Whitman engaged in this type of supportive writing. For Neruda, he attempted to change the governmental system through communism while Whitman fostered democracy. In their lyric-epics both writers try to create an overarching myth for new types of governmental systems, myths that will pull the people together under more stable systems.

Whitman's and Neruda's lyric-epics allow us several insights into the spirit of the epic in the Americas. In Latin American attempts at an epic, day-to-day politics is a more prominent theme than in Anglo American epics. Latin American writers tend to

focus more heavily on specific incidents and incorporate them into their works; examples range from coal mine strikes in Chile and disappearing people in Argentina to industrial slavery in Venezuela. The reason for this could be, as Valenzuela argues, the overt political ideologies of Latin American writers (86). While major American writers like Whitman can be politically concerned, they have much less influence on actual politics than Latin American writers because they are not usually part of political organizations.

The presence of native populations is more evidenced in Latin American writers. Anglo American writers often mention Native Americans, but they mention them as a remnant of the past. Since much of Latin America is made up of people of color (mestizos, natives, etc . . .), the issue of native populations is treated as a continuing problem. Along with this issue, the poor of Latin America emerge as a topic of discussion more frequently than in Anglo American epic attempts.<sup>1</sup> Neruda's work is an example of this theme, but other Latin American writers like Enrique Lihn present similar discussions, discussions which if present in Anglo American epic attempts are not major themes.

Anglo American writers are more concerned with the individual than Latin American writers. While Neruda hopes that individual readers will become communist readers, he stresses that they will become part of a whole when they do. In contrast, Whitman provides a prime example of the individual focus of Anglo American writers, especially with poems like *Song of Myself*, but similar ideas can be seen in Olson or Crane. Anglo American writers tend to be more concerned with individuals who can

protect themselves than in individuals blending into a community. In Latin American attempts at an epic, there is also a more pronounced focus on the people.

Latin Americans proclaim an image of a unified Latin America. This epic ideal floats through Neruda's, Chocano's, Darío's, and Bello's epic attempts. Often the epic is seen as a way to tie together the diverse countries by providing a shared history/myth for all. While Whitman is concerned with the breakup of the United States, he was writing about an already unified country. Later Anglo American writers who attempted the epic do not focus on the political unity of the U.S. or Canada. Tying into the last topic, in Anglo American writings, the future is more certain; the writers tend to focus on the future more than the past and often do not hesitate to make suggestions as to how that future will look. Latin American writers are much less secure about such statements. Even with Neruda, a writer who has a future focus, he is hesitant in proclaiming a communist Latin American future. He does state that communism will grow inevitably, but he suggests that such growth will be fraught with struggle; moreover, he only provides generalities as to how the future will look in Latin America.<sup>2</sup>

Confrontation exists in both works, but the spirit of the confrontations is phrased differently. In other words, Whitman is primarily concerned with the freedom of the individual and the strength of the Union. For Whitman, as for many U.S. theorists, the two are tied together; to have a strong union, free individuals must combine together willingly. For Neruda, the confrontation is not about individual freedom. Even though the individual is important for Neruda, the confrontations that he presents involve the people against tyrannical regimes. Latin Americans, according to Neruda, must band together so that they can seize power and then worry about individual freedoms. This

reversal resonates through much Latin American writing in the past one hundred years, and considering that during this period Latin America has had more revolutions than anywhere else in the world, it is hard to see how such an issue would not emerge in Latin American texts. This perennial problem prompts the poets to push aside the future for a focus on the past. Most Anglo American poets in the last one hundred years have not had to contend with issues of revolution—focusing on the future is easier if one is not plagued with the spectre of revolution.

The reception of the works, while tangential to the present discussion, raises the issue of the importance of poets in Anglo and Latin America. Whitman's work took years to become established as a classic of American letters, whereas Neruda received a furlough from governmental life to write and the first edition of *Canto general* was circulated in the underground of Chile when Neruda was in exile. Neruda's work was anticipated in a way that few Anglo American poets' work is. In Latin America in general, poets are more valued as exceptional citizens, but they are also more politically active, so Neruda had a chance of influencing politics. In spite of Whitman's desire to take a more active role in politics as a poet through *Leaves of Grass*, his role was limited by cultural perceptions of the poet's role.

This last comment leads to a central problem encountered with both Neruda's and Whitman's poetic theory, which is the question of how much poetry can change society. Both Whitman and Neruda believed that literature could transform the actual politics of their societies by affecting how people think; however, it is difficult, if not impossible, to show how literature can influence more than a limited group of people. In Whitman's case, he was disillusioned at the reception of *Leaves of Grass*. It did not



cause any immediate change in society because its birth was hardly noticed on a national scale. Within his lifetime, *Leaves of Grass* created no noticeable societal change. Although the text has influenced many people since then, any argument for a large impact on society would be difficult to prove. If *Leaves of Grass* has marked society, it has been influential through a trickle-down approach, yet as we learned with Reagan-era politics, such approaches work better in theory than in practice.<sup>3</sup> Neruda's influence was different from Whitman's since he was a political figure with some power in Chile. As a senator, his voice could be heard in staterooms and on campaign trails. He read his poems before crowds many times larger than Whitman ever saw, yet to state that Neruda's poetry was influential in changing society is also problematic. Was it really his poems or his political statements that Chileans heard? The Chileans elected him to power because of the political ideas that he expressed through his works, but did they elect him for his poetry? Not likely. While poets are more popular in Latin America than in Anglo America, Neruda was viewed as a hope for many Chileans since he was a member of the Communist Party, the party of hope. It is because of the hope he offered, not his poetry, that he was elected. As with Whitman, any argument that we make regarding the impact of his poetry on society as a whole is arguable.

On a larger scale, the issue arises of Neruda's and Whitman's attempts to write the continent. For the most part Whitman was concerned with encompassing all of North America, including Mexico, which he anticipated would one day be part of the United States. In several of his poems, he suggests that his poetry explains the entire New World; however, his view is limited to a large degree by his geographical boundaries. While he hints that his songs work for Latin Americans, his poems have

little trace of Latin America, and his overtures are too general to be helpful. The same is true for Neruda. More than Whitman, Neruda claims to be singing for North and South America, although he states that his specific focus is Latin America and its identity. *Canto general* contains several poems written about Mr. North, North America, and most of these poems are negative, but Neruda does argue that the average Anglo American is similar to the average Latin American; Neruda thinks that it is primarily the governmental and corporate heads who are behaving tyrannically in Latin America. That said, Neruda's claims to explain Latin America through a new mythology seems pushed to the side in favor of Chile. Neruda does focus much more on Latin America than Anglo America, but with sections on his youth, on the landscape of Chile, and on Chilean politics, he sounds more focused on Chile than on Latin America as a whole. The inability of Neruda and Whitman to encompass both Latin and Anglo America is due to the different cultural bases and the myriad ethnic groups. Historically, Latin and Anglo America differ in many ways, as mentioned earlier. These differences problematized Whitman's and Neruda's attempts at creating a literary unity between North and South America, and in the current situation, where more than a billion people live in Anglo and Latin America, it is hard to imagine one poet encompassing all.

The focus of this study, however, is not on an epic for all the Americas, but rather on how Neruda was influenced by Whitman's American lyric-epic, for it is clear that Pablo Neruda followed the example set by Walt Whitman to write his lyric-epic. From the idea of the paradigmatic American poet to the prophetic voice that he claims, Neruda presents himself in a Whitmanesque fashion. His symbols often coincide with those of Whitman; his use of the sea, of leaves, and of nature is in many ways similar to

Whitman's, as is his use of repetition and his focus on the people. *Canto general's* format is different from *Leaves of Grass's*, but many of the ideas that inform Neruda's lyric-epic are the same as Whitman's, such as his progressive view of history, his belief in creative history, his attempt to create a political poetics to influence the reader, and his belief that camaraderie is foundational; moreover, many of Neruda's political beliefs are similar to those of Whitman's, almost as if he took the themes that he learned from Whitman's poetry a step further once he was introduced to communism. Through Whitman he found what he called a "poet of the people," and it is to Whitman's example that Neruda turned when he contemplated the need for a poetic tradition in Latin America, a poetic tradition that would tie the people together as Latin Americans and move them towards communism, which finally is to say that Neruda's form and images are descended from Whitman's. With those, Neruda created a lyric-epic for Latin America to parallel Whitman's for Anglo America.

Moreover, both Whitman's and Neruda's lyric-epics were written out of the desire to support a political ideology through the perspective of the individual. This need to include the personal in the poetic venture can be understood as a product of modern thought. The lyric, while criticized by some as no longer relevant, has flourished recently. Especially after Whitman's time, lyric poets have been associated almost exclusively with the idea of the poet. At the same time, the epic in its traditional form has all but disappeared in the contemporary Americas, yet the desire to create an epic work still exists for writers in the Americas, so they have had to find new forms to flesh out those desires. The novel is one option, but Whitman's creation of the lyric-epic is another since in that form the poet can explore his or her epic desires while at the same

time retain the personal poetic position.<sup>4</sup> Whether or not this option is as workable as the novel is debatable, but that this option has become a significant poetic form is not.

In addition, one could argue that both *Leaves of Grass* and *Canto general* fail in attaining the status of complete epic works. After all, most readers encounter the poems through individual lyrics in selected works or anthologies. Both works have indeed been read according to the lyric traditions that they tap into and help create; moreover, the presence of the poetic ego at times intervenes heavily in both works; however, to read the lyrics separately is to isolate them from their whole. They are best read in context; moreover, the epic spirit and elements pervade both lyric-epics, and both have influenced other poets to attempt similar poems. Finally, even if we were to say that Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* does not cohere as an entire epic work—overwhelmingly critics agree the Neruda's work is an epic—, that would not diminish the lyric-epic form that it created for later epic attempts to use.

This last point brings up a final issue in this study, which is the relevance of *Leaves of Grass* and *Canto general* for the contemporary world and contemporary poets. In the United States this question is not as frequently asked of Whitman as it is of other writers. Whitman's influence can be seen on many major writers. Even writers who originally rejected his work, like Henry James, are influenced by it. In addition, the political ideas that structure Whitman's work are similar to those of many Americans so that they are easy to accept by readers. The politics that he wanted to preserve has remained intact even if it has changed significantly. Neruda's work, however, concerns a political system that no longer seems viable in the contemporary world. In fact, his views on Stalin and the U.S.S.R. seem, in the kindest wording, misplaced, yet the

readership of Neruda has in no way declined over the years as the politics that he espouses has; rather, his works continue to spread to new readers and to inspire other poets. The political system that Neruda embraced is fading with history, but like Dante, whose characters have shifted into literary figures over time, Neruda's characters still seem relevant inside the context of the work. Like Homer, Virgil, or Whitman himself, the vision that Neruda presents is complete so that the reader enters into it and reads in context. And perhaps, readers have taken his rewriting of history a step further than he intended by reading his characters as textual creations so that a figure like Recabarren, the founder of the Chilean Communist Party, is heroic in context, even though the reader might not know his name. In other words, the reader can understand him as a figure of hope in a society that needs it. In this way, Neruda's work is still relevant for his readers even if his primary goal of creating communists might have failed.

Ultimately, both Neruda and Whitman juggled the diverse elements of the Americas and molded this infinite variety into a viable world view. They have made their lyric-epics living, breathing, world-changing forces even if the world is not yet aware of them. Thus, whether or not they succeeded in fulfilling their political goals, they produced works that are foundational for Anglo and Latin America and that continue to influence other poets in the Americas and abroad.

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Even today, it is estimated that the top ten percent of Latin Americans, people who are primarily European in descent, receive close to fifty percent of yearly income (Prevost 101).

<sup>2</sup> This problem is common to much socialist/communist writing before the systems of government have been installed.

<sup>3</sup> The trickle-down theory works best in regard to these writers if we consider their role in the respective educational systems of Anglo and Latin America. In the United States, many school children are introduced to one or two pieces of Whitman's work. In Latin America, especially in Chile, many school children are required to memorize some works from Neruda. Through the educational systems, these writers have become at least familiar names to a wide section of society.

<sup>4</sup> The lyric-epic form has influenced the basic style of poetic collections with many poets attempting to create a connection between the poems in their collections.

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## **Vita**

William (Bill) Allegrezza is a native of Mississippi who lived in three Southern states only to end up in Chicago, where he lives, writes, and teaches. Along the way he earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Dallas and a master's degree in English from Louisiana State University. He has taught courses at Louisiana State University, Columbia College, Roosevelt University, Morton College, and Indiana University Northwest, where currently he is an associate faculty member. He has published poems, articles, reviews, and translations in numerous journals in several countries, including Finland, Holland, Australia, Czechoslovakia, New Zealand, and the United States, and he has two poetry collections to his name. He is married to an award-winning landscape architect and marathoner, Kelly Allegrezza.